Henry Berger on Eugene McCarthy

The Television World of Lorenzo Carcaterra

Stanley Fish on Scholars and Their Audiences

The Carmen Symposium

The cover is from the Alpha Video DVD version of the 1942 "B" movie, American Empire, starring Richard Dix and Leo Carrillo, all about cattle barons, cattle rustling, slippery Cajuns, and comical Mexicans. The editor recommends the film for lovers of low grade westerns, although it is not as good as William Witney’s Roy Rogers films. Alpha Video puts out an extensive line of "B" movies, from Bela Lugosi to the East End Kids, not always using the best source prints. But at prices as low as $6.98, you get what you pay for.
My Summer of Jazz

Editor’s note—The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded the Center for the Humanities a $225,000 grant for a summer institute for high school teachers to learn how to use jazz in their curricula. Chris Gilde, one of the teachers who spent a month in St. Louis, gives his impressions of the institute.

Now that I can look back at my experiences at the NEH Jazz Institute: Teaching Jazz as American Culture from an objective distance, I can say with certainty that for me this was truly an experience of a lifetime, but not because the institute was ready-made for the lifelong jazz enthusiast (which admittedly I am), and not because of the opportunity to study jazz with a variety of teachers from all over the country at one of the most beautiful campuses, Washington University in St. Louis, and not because of the chance to meet and study jazz with Gerald Early (okay, maybe), but, as it turns out, for subtler, less obvious reasons.

They are less obvious because the experiences I came away with were not at all the ones I had expected. I guess you could say my original expectations were selfish and self-serving: to listen to jazz, study the lives of the jazz greats, and then become a jazz trivia expert. But the real mission of the institute did not allow for a narrow, names-and-dates jazz-enthusiast approach to the study of jazz. Instead, we were at the institute to understand how a humanities approach to our study could enrich and broaden our students’ understanding of American culture. I’ve taught high school for 22 years, and I’ve listened to jazz for most of my life, but it wasn’t until I attended the institute and listened to what the amazing variety of jazz scholars, historians, and musicians had to say about jazz and culture that I began to understand the wider implications of using jazz as a cultural learning tool in my classroom.

So then the question I came away with, the one for my students (or more aptly, one they will have for me), is a fundamental one: Why do they (or anyone for that matter) need to know anything at all about jazz? From a high school English teacher’s perspective, the answer is more problematic. Unfortunately, we have become so focused on teaching the approved literary canon or, worse, teaching to the state test, that we as English teachers have lost focus on what may be most important for our students—that is, a clearer, wider understanding of the culture that produces the very literature we want our students to examine and to have something intelligent to say about it. What the scholars and musicians at the institute have helped us to understand and recognize about the value of jazz as a cultural learning tool can best be described by Ralph Ellison, in Robert O’Meally’s introduction to Ellison’s collection of jazz writings Living with Music, as the “blues-based jazz element” that is “at the core of twentieth-century American culture.” What we want our students to realize, then, is that jazz is at the heart of their own experience. What this means for the high school classroom teacher, in any content area since many content areas were represented at the institute, is that the study of jazz can help students understand and experience the value of their own cultural heritage, and in so doing, they can begin to look outside of themselves and achieve a deeper understanding of who they are.

The power of jazz, as a teaching tool, comes not from the music alone; it comes from the students’ realization, finally, that the origin of the very music they love and listen to on a regular basis has its roots in jazz. We, as teachers, must help our students to acknowledge and connect jazz with their own experiences.

What I found most productive about my experience is the fact that the institute itself became the model for a humanities approach to teaching jazz as American culture in the classroom. If I were to put myself in my students’ shoes, I would experience a variety of different ways to understand or come to terms with jazz as cultural artifact. As students at the institute, we experienced jazz in a wondrous kaleidoscope of forms: as history, examining jazz’s origins in New Orleans; as dance, watching jazz dancers, both tap and ballet; as literature in the jazz writings of James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison; as film soundtrack, bio-pic, and musical; as art in the collages of Romare Bearden and in the jazz quilts of East St. Louis artist Edna Patterson-Petty; as a political statement during the civil rights movement; as gender studies with the all-girl swing bands of the ’40s; and as jazz in performance with Bucky Pizzarelli, Pat Martino, and OGD trio of St. Louis jazz musician Reggie Thomas. We took our experiences at the institute and as a result of our collaborative efforts translated them into a variety of useful lesson plans reflecting a variety of content areas that we can all take into our classrooms.

In a film about the artistic process of Romare Bearden, he is quoted as saying, “If you’re any kind of an artist you make a miraculous journey and you come back and make some statements in shapes and colors of where you were” (The Art of Romare Bearden, 2003). I find the quotation fitting; all of us at the institute made this “miraculous” journey; now it’s time for us to make some statements in “shapes and colors” of where we were.

Chris Gilde teaches high school English and the history of jazz at Seaside High School in Seaside, Oregon.
A British historian, Dominic Sandbrook, has written a full-size biography of Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, who began his career in politics as a conventional liberal anti-communist, strongly endorsed by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), but who underwent a political conversion in the 1960s. Disturbed by the growing militarization of American foreign policy, increasing revelations of CIA covert operations, and the rank abuse of presidential power by Lyndon Johnson, McCarthy joined other U.S. senators, most of them Democrats, in breaking with the Vietnam War policies of the president and his allies and challenging Johnson’s leadership of the Democratic Party in 1968.

That was the year American historian Lewis Gould has called The Election That Changed America (1993) and journalist Julius Witcover has lamented was The Year The Dream Died (1997). Gould and Witcover reach similar conclusions though with different emphases, suggested by their respective book titles: the once confident hopes and fervent expectations of Americans in the 1960s, who believed their country was moving toward greater social and economic justice and would reverse its interventionist foreign policy by ending the war in Southeast Asia, were crushed by escalating violence in Vietnam, continuing racial turmoil in the nation, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the defeat of the McCarthy presidential campaign, and by Richard Nixon’s victory over the eventual Democratic Party nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. The election result, the two writers conclude in retrospect, marked the genesis of Republican Party dominance nationally and a conservative assault upon liberalism that transformed American political history for the remainder of the 20th century and, one might add, in the present century as well.

Sandbrook does not contest these widely accepted historical perspectives but he casts his critical biography of McCarthy specifically in the context of what he describes as “the rise and fall of postwar liberalism,” a politics the author contrasts with earlier New Deal liberalism by its greater commitment to the cause of civil rights but more significantly, in the post 1945 era, by its vigorous Cold War anti-communist posture. McCarthy, first elected as congressman in 1948, fit this description of a postwar liberal, particularly emphasizing his anti-communist credentials as a Catholic Democrat from rural Minnesota.

But then, Sandbrook argues, as a consequence of changing political demographics in the decades that followed, turmoil and violence across and within racial boundaries, and escalating criticism of American foreign policy in Vietnam and elsewhere, the postwar liberal consensus fragmented and collapsed. McCarthy, Sandbrook states, lowered his anti-communist profile, rebuked his party’s political leadership, and became a leading dissenter of an ill-defined “New Politics” that reshaped the Democratic Party but also alienated traditional constituencies, especially white male workers, diminishing the party’s electoral successes. McCarthy’s political biography, Sandbrook claims, serves “to illuminate… politics …over the course of the twentieth century against the background of wider political and social change” (p.xii).

Prodigiously researched and densely documented (there are 52 pages of notes and 25 pages of bibliography), Sandbrook’s account nonetheless provides a good deal of evidence and the author’s own admission that, from the beginning of his political career, McCarthy “was never quite the quintessential liberal” (p. 293) many portrayed him to be, that he actually departed from allegedly prevailing liberal positions in several instances, and that he made political decisions, especially concerning his ill-fated run for the presidency in 1968, that were just as often the result of personal political motives and vendettas as they were guided by higher moral principles.

Sandbrook indicates that revenge was a primary factor motivating McCarthy to challenge Johnson for the 1968 nomination. Quoting McCarthy himself, Johnson, with whom McCarthy had forged a close relationship after he was elected to the Senate in 1958 and when Johnson was the most powerful Senate Majority Leader in history, had supposedly promised McCarthy that he would be chosen as Johnson’s running mate in 1964. “Without any notice to me, it was Humphrey….I vowed I would get that son of a bitch [Johnson] and I did” (quoted on p. 172).

Sandbrook also goes out of his way to include criticisms of McCarthy by some of the senator’s closest associates. In one passage, for example, Sandbrook quotes the senator’s speechwriter,
Jeremy Larner, who observed that McCarthy was “fantastically self-righteous about himself and about everything about himself” (p. 207), a judgment shared by Sandbrook: “McCarthy was a proud man, and the adulation he received in some quarters encouraged him to think even more highly of himself” (p. 189). Such hubris and McCarthy’s less than charismatic campaign style and disorganized politics, Sandbrook charges, contributed to his failure to capture the presidential nomination in 1968, a doubtful result in any case.

Others who have written about McCarthy have also discussed the senator’s imperfections while generally admiring the unconventional reluctant rebel who tried to provide an alternative to the domestic and foreign policies of the country’s leadership. For all of his negative comments about McCarthy’s personal flaws, Sandbrook’s own distinctive contribution to the McCarthy story is his perceptively interesting analysis of McCarthy’s evolving ideas about public policy priorities that challenged post-war orthodox liberal ideology and practice.

McCarthy’s core ideas were in fact not rooted in secular progressive, reformist thought but rather were embedded in his commitment to Catholic values he acquired as a youth and expanded intellectually as an accomplished student at St. John’s Preparatory School and its adjoining university, situated near McCarthy’s home town in rural Minnesota and staffed by Benedictine monks.

McCarthy’s Catholicism, “refined and reinforced by his years at St. John’s,” Sandbrook stresses, “was the single most important influence in his intellectual life” (p. 9), and it distinguished him from other leading liberal politicians of the period. Sandbrook points out that after graduation from college McCarthy entered St. John’s Abbey monastery intending to become a priest and left a year later because of an unresolved personal dispute with an influential monk and his decision to marry Abigail Quigley. Exempt from the draft during World War II for medical reasons, McCarthy instead worked at the War Department in Washington. In 1946 he accepted an appointment to teach sociology at the College of St. Thomas on the edge of Minnesota’s capital, St. Paul, and, Sandbrook argues, it was “the influence of his [Catholic] friends on the St. Thomas faculty” that persuaded McCarthy to become “active in electoral politics,” beginning in 1948 with his election as a young congressman (p. 40).

The most important of his faculty associates shared McCarthy’s Catholic beliefs, grounded on the one hand in the writings of European Catholic clerical and lay intellectuals, 20th-century apostles of Thomas Aquinas whose philosophy advocated rationally restrained and morally responsible Christianity in an organically unified world and deeply influenced on the other hand by Catholic radical social activism that had become especially significant during the Great Depression. Propagated by Catholic intellectuals such as Virgel Michel and the Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, these Catholic social activists used Neo-Thomist rational thought to promote community responsibility and communal commitment to social justice and equity rather than privileging individual personal liberty. The more radical of the Catholic activists uncompromisingly attacked selfish capitalism, artificially constructed inequalities, and usurpation of power by the State. Inspired by two papal Encyclicals, Rerum Novarum (1891) and Quadragesimo Anno (1931), both of which addressed issues of social and economic justice, Catholic activists pressed for stricter controls over capitalism and a redistribution of wealth, “distributive justice” as McCarthy labeled the concept, in an effort to realize the vision of a more equitable society.

McCarthy embraced both neo-scholastic Thomism and Catholic social activism. Sandbrook writes of McCarthy’s “interest in order, stability and the pattern of history” (p. 22) and his “suspicion of the modern secular world” that, McCarthy told an audience in 1952, “has destroyed the essential community and social organizations which were once a fundamental and vital part of the social structure…” (quoted on p. 23). He believed the teachings of radical Catholic social activism, which “had deeply impressed him” (p. 13), should be applied to political reform movements on behalf of greater social justice. Critical of the “institutional conservatism of the Church” and insisting that religious issues such as birth control (he favored freedom of choice on the subject) and abortion (he thought government should not legislate on the issue) should be “matters for individual conscience rather than…national legislation,” McCarthy never stopped “thinking of himself as a Catholic” (p. 21).

McCarthy, Sandbrook declares, “made very clear the religious inspiration for his social agenda,” writing in his first book, Frontiers in American Society (1960), published two years after election to his first term in the Senate:

“It is absurd to hold that religion and politics can be kept wholly apart when they meet in the conscience of one...
man. If a man is religious and if he is in politics, one fact will relate to the other if he is indeed a whole man” (quoted on p. 42).

No doubt that George W. Bush could have written those same words in support of “faith-based politics.” McCarthy, however, rejected evangelical Christianity, and his Catholic radical social agenda argued for a “positive and natural function by government to assist man in the pursuit of perfection and of happiness…The fundamental object of politics,” McCarthy affirmed, “is to bring about progressive change in keeping with the demands of social justice” (quoted on p. 42). McCarthy’s eventual repudiation of Cold War orthodoxy and his opposition to the Vietnam War, Sandbrook concludes, were anchored in Catholic doctrines of moral principles derived from rational reasoning and social activism.

The Minnesota senator occasionally strayed from his strict moral compass en route to political career advancement, most notably when powerful Senate Majority Leader at the time,Lyndon Johnson, assigned the freshman senator to the influential Finance Committee. Sandbrook suggests that McCarthy had “somehow done a deal with Johnson and the oil interests in order to get his seat on the Finance Committee” (p. 95). True or not, McCarthy failed to support the elimination of a controversial federal tax exemption enjoyed by U.S. oil companies, voting against the proposed legislation several times. Sandbrook does not, however, supply any evidence that McCarthy’s senatorial or presidential campaigns received donations from the oil industry.

In any case, by 1967 McCarthy had joined the growing list of senatorial opponents of the Johnson Administration’s foreign policy, including its conduct of the war in Vietnam. Here also, Sandbrook ascribes McCarthy’s dissent to several factors but most of all to his Catholic commitments, reinforced by the new emphasis placed on conscience rather than authority most eloquently articulated by the encyclical, Pacem in Terris, issued in 1963 by Pope John XXIII. While many in the American Catholic hierarchy vociferously supported the war and President Johnson, there was a growing rift in the church as larger numbers of priests and Catholic lay citizens joined the opposition. Sandbrook explains that among his constituents, “the single most important influence on McCarthy was the position of his fellow Catholics” (p. 145) increasing numbers of whom were objecting to Johnson’s war.

By the time of the climactic 1968 presidential primaries in Oregon and California, McCarthy had broadened his indictment of U.S. foreign policy and was arguing that the fundamental causes of America’s war in Vietnam “lay not with Johnson,” but with false assumptions of Cold War ideology originating in the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations, the growing impact on American society of the military establishment “whose influence reaches into almost every aspect of our national life,” and America’s pursuit of “the idea of manifest destiny” (quoted on p. 195).

McCarthy’s historic attempt to capture the Democratic nomination for President in 1968 was ultimately unsuccessful. Though his was, in fact, “the first criticism of Cold War orthodoxy by a major candidate in a presidential campaign since 1948” (p. 196), the reasons for McCarthy’s defeat are not difficult to identify and Sandbrook acknowledges them. The senator’s campaign grew increasingly disorganized and made only limited efforts to secure support in the non-primary states which, by far, had the most delegate votes (only 15 states held presidential primaries in 1968). McCarthy himself was responsible for his defeat, making scant attempts to reach beyond his base of relatively affluent suburban middle-class white Americans (many of them independent voters who were a distinct minority of the electorate at the time), refusing to reach out to former supporters and key players of Senator Robert Kennedy’s campaign after Kennedy’s assassination in June. McCarthy’s seeming and ironic inability to work with others and his persistent personalization of politics in petty and vindictive ways undid him.

Sandbrook asserts that “in the long term…the 1968 campaign was a pivotal moment in the history of both the Democratic Party and modern liberalism. The broad liberal consensus that had…bound together middle-class progressives and low income workers was now in a state of advanced decay” (p. 222). The author also comes close to blaming McCarthy (who finally endorsed Hubert Humphrey late in the general election campaign) for Nixon’s victory, for schisms that developed inside the Democratic Party, and for the subsequent triumph of Republican conservatism in American politics.

McCarthy, who subsequently mounted several other failed presidential bids and who, at nearly age 90, now resides in a Washington, D.C., retirement home, is probably mildly amused by Sandbrook’s suggestive claims that claim too much. Humphrey’s close association, almost to the end of the election campaign, with the policies and politics of a discredited and increasingly unpopular incumbent president, the deliberate distancing of the White House-controlled national Democratic Party organization from the Humphrey candidacy, the chaotic nature of the vice president’s campaign and, above all else, Richard Nixon’s adroit exploitation of racial fears among white Americans were the major ingredients of Humphrey’s defeat. It is unlikely that an earlier endorsement of Humphrey by McCarthy would have made a difference. Moreover, the shift of the Republican Party to the right had, in fact, begun well before the 1968 political season got under way. Barry Goldwater’s massive defeat four years earlier in 1964 was deceptive, and the Republicans strongly rebounded in the 1966 congressional and gubernatorial election contests (in which Richard Nixon campaigned vigorously for his party’s candidates), including the overwhelming triumph of Ronald Reagan who won the California governorship.

That said, Sandbrook’s book is important, bringing into sharp relief a more complete understanding of McCarthy’s life and his motivating political philosophy, especially the underappreciated influence of religion upon his public career. At a time when historians, among other scholars, are rediscovering the role of religion in the making of American culture, Sandbrook’s discussion of its centrality in the life of Eugene McCarthy should attract readers. Democrats, in particular, should pay attention.

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Near the conclusion of Lorenzo Carcaterra’s new novel *Paradise City*, the protagonist, a Neapolitan police detective named Giancarlo Lo Manto, utters one of the book’s most telling and astute lines: “And most times it’s luck, not the plan, that gets you through” (p. 290). That this dialogue amplifies the novel’s overall narrative construction while foreshadowing the plot’s immediate concern, Lo Manto’s fast-approaching shootout with the hired minions of Pete Rossi, New York City’s most powerful crime boss, is a testament to Carcaterra’s ability to infuse *Paradise City* with intelligence, brutal honesty, and self-deprecation all at once.

“Brutal” is, indeed, an appropriate adjective for the entire novel, which tells the story of Lo Manto’s mission to destroy Rossi’s criminal enterprise. Happily, the author does not neglect the corruption, venality, and violence of the best Mafia novels, although he does educate the reader in some unexpected, yet fascinating details, of Mob life. Rossi is New York City’s most important Camorrista, meaning that he is a member of the Camorra, the Mafia organization based in Naples, Italy, that, despite its power and influence, is not well-known to American readers. Carcaterra lavishes much attention on the internal operations of this group and the connections between its Naples and New York wings, providing the basis for the novel’s central plot device, in which Lo Manto travels from Italy to the Big Apple through a slapdash approach to plotting that will result in narrative incoherence, *Paradise City* is a tightly woven, well-plotted novel whose seat-of-the-pants energy propels its reader through a sometimes dizzying array of confrontations, betrayals, violent encounters, and character interaction. The lack of a plan even comes to feel like a distinct advantage when the book moves toward an inevitable (and foreordained) conclusion that, once achieved, makes perfect narrative sense.

It does seem like luck as much as any authorial plan that gets us through *Paradise City*. Carcaterra himself confirms this suspicion, saying that “I’ve never written from an outline and I didn’t outline this novel. I had it in my head, and it seemed to flow. When I had to stop writing, I would just pick up from where I was the night before.” While this confession might worry us, signaling a slapdash approach to plotting that will result in narrative incoherence, *Paradise City* is a tightly woven, well-plotted novel whose seat-of-the-pants energy propels its reader through a sometimes dizzying array of confrontations, betrayals, violent encounters, and character interaction. The lack of a plan even comes to feel like a distinct advantage when the book moves toward an inevitable (and foreordained) conclusion that, once achieved, makes perfect narrative sense.

Betrayal and power, Carcaterra likes to say, are among his favorite themes, and he returns to them in every novel. *Paradise City* is no exception, and if Carcaterra can never top the heady mixture of gangland backstabbing and palace intrigue featured in his 2001 novel *Gangster* (so-named because, as the author...
observes, “no gangster novel had ever been named Gangster”), he nearly equals it in Paradise City (so named because it summarizes the dream that New York City represents for Neapolitans) by upsetting every expectation that Lo Manto has about his life’s work and, more importantly, his life. To say more would reveal many of the plot’s secrets, but Lo Manto’s mission (really, a vendetta) against the Rossi crime family causes the protagonist to question the principles that he holds most sacred and the memories that he holds most dear. This complicated inner life is what makes Carcaterra’s novel a worthy addition to one’s reading list, particularly since Lo Manto, an impure and occasionally improvident hero, is not the novel’s most interesting or well-drawn character.

That honor belongs to Felipe Lopez, a homeless 15-year-old Bronx boy who sticks in the mind longer than any other element of Paradise City. Felipe is a wry, feisty, unapologetic, and resilient person whose mistreatment and indigent circumstances belie his intelligence. Felipe is also a wounded character who understands the emptiness and unhappiness of his own existence without being maudlin or myopic about it. Carcaterra’s sympathy for Felipe is marred neither by sentiment nor by the temptation to create an unbearably precocious, wise-beyond-his-years child who dispenses sage advice at key moments. Felipe is, above all, a boy whose circumstances force him to act like an adult when he would rather live as a kid. He is a triumph of characterization for the author, descending from the complicated, yet tangibly real children that populate Carcaterra’s 2002 novel Street Boys. In that book, Carcaterra’s fictionalized portrait of an actual historical event, a group of Italian children defend their homes by fighting off a German Panzer tank in the war-torn streets of 1943 Naples. In Paradise City, Felipe Lopez defends his life and his honor by giving Lo Manto information that only he (Felipe) can unearth about Rossi’s crime family.

Carcaterra also succeeds with Jennifer Fabini, Lo Manto’s New York partner. As the author says, “I knew they had to hook up,” but this romantic relationship develops in a singularly unusual manner. Lo Manto slowly recognizes that, despite his best instincts, he is in love with Fabini, who is the daughter of a legendary New York City detective. Rather than having his female protagonist behave in stereotypically breathless fashion, Carcaterra reverses our expectations of Fabini. She is not a sex object, a clinging girlfriend, or a battered spouse, which is a great relief to readers conditioned to expect only these three roles from gangster novels and crime thrillers. In fact, Fabini never utters the words “I love you” to Lo Manto, but prefers to leave her deepest feelings unspoken.

Betrayal and power, Carcaterra likes to say, are among his favorite themes, and he returns to them in every novel.

This restraint is one of Paradise City’s greatest strengths. Carcaterra, by structuring his book as a violent character study, participates in a tradition that includes Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Chandler, and other modernist writers who prefer taciturn characters to people who ceaselessly analyze their own motives.

With all these positives, Paradise City does contain a few missteps. Carcaterra’s lean prose is sometimes clumsy and unwieldy, the product of too much relentless writing and too little revision. Readers who have grown accustomed to the rhythmical, evocative language of Street Boys, Gangster, and, especially, Carcaterra’s extraordinary memoirs, A Safe Place and Sleepers, may be surprised by how rushed many of the sentences and paragraphs feel in the novel’s first half. In addition, there are so many references to Starbucks coffee that I began to wonder if the author was soliciting product-placement contracts for an eventual film adaptation rather than including specific details to make his description of contemporary New York more authentic. A good in-joke, in which Lo Manto and a New York police colleague drink out of Law & Order mugs, is marred by the publisher’s decision to emblazon “Writer and Producer for Law & Order” directly underneath Carcaterra’s name on the novel’s hardcover jacket. Rather than becoming a nice intertextual tip of the hat to Carcaterra’s high-profile stint as a writer-producer on one of primetime television’s best and most literate series, it seems jarringly out-of-place. I should add that this outcome is not Carcaterra’s fault, but rather that the publisher has demolished the author’s joke by callously attempting to ride Law & Order’s coattails to larger book sales.

Since Carcaterra’s dialogue is sharp, precise, unvarnished, and often wonderfully funny, these lapses of prose style are more noticeable than they might otherwise have been. Even so, Paradise City does what all good novels should do: It offers an intriguing and worthwhile story that is (mostly) well-told. In other words, Carcaterra’s newest novel is not a perfect book, although its imperfections cast the novel’s many strengths in even sharper relief. Carcaterra promises that Lo Manto, Fabini, and other Paradise City characters will return in a future novel. I pray that Felipe Lopez is one of them, for he is one of 2004’s best and most memorable literary discoveries.

Jason Vest, who recently earned the Ph.D., is a lecturer in Washington University’s Department of English.
Interview with Lorenzo Carcaterra

Lorenzo Carcaterra is a leading novelist, screenwriter, and producer. The author of two memoirs, 1992’s A Safe Place and 1995’s Sleepers, as well as the novels Apaches (1997), Gangster (2001), Street Boys (2002), and Paradise City (2004), he has also written a variety of film and television projects. In 2003 and 2004, Carcaterra served as a staff writer and producer for the 13th and 14th seasons of American television’s longest-running primetime drama series, Law & Order. Raised in Hell’s Kitchen, Carcaterra is one of the best chroniclers of New York City’s complex and vibrant street life. Belles Lettres recently caught up with Carcaterra during one of the busiest periods of his professional career.

What projects are you currently writing and/or producing?

I have signed a new, three-book contract with my publisher, Ballantine Books. I’ve begun writing my next novel, The Chasers, which will be a sequel to my very first novel, Apaches. I’m excited by this project because I’m returning to explore the lives of characters that I’d left behind several years ago. I’ll also be adding new characters to the team [Apaches follows a group of New York City police officers who form a renegade unit to investigate and to avenge vicious crimes], and it should be fun to see how they interact with the previously established characters.

I recently closed a deal with Touchstone Television and ABC to create and executive-produce a television series titled The Ghost. I can’t give away many details yet, but this show will be my take on the cop genre. ABC selected it as the first pilot project for the 2006-2007 season. I’m in the research phase of the pilot script now and will turn that in sometime during March or April 2005. I’m putting a lot of work into The Ghost during these early phases because my objective is to get it on the air and make it a successful series.

I’ve also turned in two drafts of the screenplay for the film version of my novel Gangster, which is being produced by Joe Roth at Revolution Studios.

Not long ago, I was contacted by Eden Games, a subdivision of Atari, to write a video game called Alone in the Dark 5. This offer was quite a surprise to me. Some people at Eden, which is based in Lyons, France, had read one of my books in French and liked it. I’ve never written a video game before, and since the Alone in the Dark series features a complicated storyline, I’ll eventually write 18 to 24 episodes for it. This type of writing is new to me, but I’m looking forward to it and to spending time in France.

I’ve also added a graphic novel titled Midnight Squad, which is a supernatural action-adventure story for Jerry Bruckheimer that will also be made into a video game and a film.

I recently had my first short story published in a collection called Dangerous Women (2005) and have begun writing my first stageplay for Michael Imperioli’s theatre group. Imperioli is most famous for playing Tony Soprano’s nephew Christopher on The Sopranos, but he’s also a terrific theater actor. Since I’ve never written a play before, I thought this would be a nice challenge.

The final project, and one that I think I’ll have a great time doing, is a film titled Paolo and Francesca. It’s an Italian-American co-production that Jane Campion will probably direct. The story is based on Dante’s Inferno and follows two brothers who love the same woman. This passion leads to murder, and Dante is actually a character in the film. Dante listens as this story is recounted to him, and it eventually finds its way into the Inferno. I don’t usually get offered love stories, so this project will be another departure for me.

What are the differences between serving as a writer and producer for Law & Order and as the creator, executive producer, and showrunner of The Ghost?

The level of responsibility is just enormous. On Law & Order, I was responsible for three scripts a year. Even though I was on set or on location working with the director and the actors while my episodes were being shot, it was still only three times a year. With The Ghost, I’m responsible for every line of dialogue, every actor who is cast, every scene, every cut, literally all of the elements. Everything you see on the screen will have been reviewed and approved by me. It will be a 24/7 venture, and a long, difficult, and, at times, grueling job. That’s why not many people can serve as a showrunner for more than a few seasons because the workload is so intense. At the same time, I’m very much looking forward to it.

Do you have an outline of how the series will unfold? How many scripts will you write for the series, and how will the writing staff function?

Writing a series is like writing a novel in that you have the opportunity to really get close to the characters. Even though 150 people will work on the show, its success will largely depend on the quality of the writing. I have a bunch of ideas I want to do, especially since Lorenzo Carcaterra. Street Boys. New York: Ballantine Books, 2002. Jacket design by Carl D. Galian.
this series is a different approach to the cop genre. I’ll write the first three or four episodes myself, and maybe even the first five or six. I’ve started thinking about writers and actors, but we’re only in the preliminary stages right now.

I’m the only person who knows where the characters will go, but I want to maintain enough flexibility to allow the writing staff to surprise me. I’m open to these surprises and looking forward to them. My staff writers, if all goes as planned, should produce four scripts per season. To tell you how much television has changed over the years, Dick Wolf [creator and executive producer of Law & Order and all its spinoffs] once wrote 15 scripts for a single season of Miami Vice. Now, with writing staffs averaging between eight and 10 people, three scripts per season is considered a full plate. I want my writers to be engaged with the show and its characters, which means that they might have to work harder than on some other series, but they’ll be sharper as a result.

Will The Ghost feature stand-alone episodes or has the success of serialized dramas such as 24, Alias, Lost, and Desperate Housewives affected your plans for the series?

It will probably mix both types of stories, although I prefer standalones. Stand-alone episodes are generally considered better for syndication because the audience can watch any episode without necessarily having to know what came before. Law & Order is a great example of that kind of storytelling. 24, Alias, Lost, and Desperate Housewives are all excellent shows, and if they prove anything, it’s that the television audience doesn’t have as short an attention span as we sometimes think it does. People will tune into an ongoing storyline as long as it’s compelling, well written, well acted, and well directed.

I’m interested in telling intriguing and unique stories, so we’ll see what develops. I have my own ideas, the writing staff will add its own ideas, and, with luck and a lot of hard work, I hope we’ll produce a series that people will enjoy watching.

How different is it to write a teleplay for a weekly series versus a screenplay for a single, two-hour movie?

Basically, on television, the writer is king. Most series won’t allow changes to the script without the writer’s permission. For instance, during The West Wing’s first four seasons, no one—not the actors, the directors, or the crew—could change a comma without [creator] Aaron Sorkin’s approval. Film is much different. The director often doesn’t care what the writer thinks after the script goes into production, and sometimes the writer is the last person to know about changes.

That said, I’ve enjoyed the process of adapting Gangster for Joe Roth, who will also direct the picture.

Is it difficult to make revisions to a screenplay adaptation of your own novel? How many changes has Mr. Roth suggested for Gangster? Do these suggestions make you uncomfortable?

Joe didn’t want the novel’s narrator, Gabe, or his mother. He asked me if I was okay with this change, and I was. Novels are
different from screenplays because films are often more stream-lined than books. Eliminating these characters is a big loss, but including Gabe and his mother would make the film two separate stories. As it now stands, the film will focus on the characters Angelo and Pudge from childhood to death. In this situation, the decision became, “Are you willing to write the script with these changes?” I was, because I think Joe has a good sense of how the story should be told onscreen. His notes on my first draft were minimal, and I’m still waiting for his notes about the second draft. I don’t expect any problems.

On the other hand, when Barry Levinson [Oscar-winning director of such films as Rain Man (1988), Diner (1982), and Avalon (1990)] was involved with the film adaptation of Street Boys, he wanted as much of the book as possible in the script. Different directors bring different ideas and attitudes, and the writer needs to be flexible.

Speaking of Barry Levinson, he was one of the first people approached to direct Beyond the Sea, the film about Bobby Darin’s life that Kevin Spacey recently brought to the screen. What was your involvement with that project, and have you seen the finished film?

Beyond the Sea was the first script that I ever worked on. Barry brought me in and gave me some terrific on-the-job training in how to write a screenplay. Really, it was like being taken to scriptwriting school. At that point, Barry wanted Johnny Depp to play Bobby Darin. One of the best parts of my involvement with the film was meeting Johnny Depp while he was filming Donnie Brasco.

I haven’t seen Spacey’s film yet. To his credit, he got the movie made, which is an accomplishment in itself. I was originally brought in to lighten up a previous draft of the script written by [frequent Levinson collaborator] Paul Attanasio. Then someone else came in after me and revised my version of the script. That’s the way of the world in Hollywood, and I personally had a good experience working with Barry on the screenplay.

Sadly, Jerry Orbach died of prostate cancer on December 28, 2004. His contributions to American musical theatre (Orbach originated the role of Billy Flynn in the initial run of the musical Chicago, among numerous other Broadway performances) and to Law & Order (Orbach played Detective Lennie Briscoe for 12 seasons) are incalculable. How do you choose to remember him?

He was simply a great guy. I learned more from Jerry than any other actor. He made me a better writer because he knew the weight of the words, and how to transform the words. One of my favorite parts of working on Law & Order was being on the set and changing dialogue on the fly. I’d say that we changed around 30 percent of the lines in any of the scripts that I wrote for the show. Jerry was a master at knowing what his character should say, and he always had a laugh and a joke. I don’t think I’ve ever learned as many jokes from one person as I learned from Jerry.

He also loved every minute of acting and working on Law & Order. He was such a good actor for such a long time, but his TV and movie success didn’t come until he was in his 50s. His attitude was always, “Let’s make this work.” I remember quite clearly how I had written an interrogation scene to take place on the roof of a building that would have involved getting a spectacular shot of the East River and Upper Manhattan. When we got up there, the wind was blowing so hard that Jerry’s hair stood straight up. He turned to me and said, in a joking way, “You’re fucking kidding me, right?” Then he said to the crew, “I know Lorenzo has a Plan B.” And I did. We filmed the scene in the basement. Some television stars would have stormed off the set when confronted with those conditions, but not Jerry. He wanted to do whatever he could to make the show as good as it could be.

The real testament to Jerry came on his last day of filming Law & Order. After his final shot, the entire crew of 150 people clapped for 20 minutes. Twenty minutes—think about that. And they weren’t applauding the actor; they were applauding the man.

With all the projects that you’re currently pursuing, how do you find time to work on them all?

As I’ve said before, I have insomnia, which is a great help. But I’ve also been working out two hours each day, which makes me feel much fresher. On a weekly TV series, they feed you all the time and, after putting in 15- to 16-hour days, you’re beyond exhausted by the end of the season. However, I’ve never had so much work in my life as I do now, and that’s a blessing. I’m very thankful that so many people are so interested in what I have to say. I’m also a proponent of the theory that it all eventually gets done. So, it all will eventually get done.

Interviewed by Jason Vest
The Prodigal is vintage Walcott. At 75, the poet is frankly talking about his Odyssean wanderings and his own mortality. This Nobel Laureate’s poems always mine a deep autobiographical vein; “Omeros” and “Tiepolo’s Hound” were respectively informed by his love of particulars in Homer’s “Odyssey” and Tiepolo’s art, but just as importantly, each was imbued with Walcott’s own world and an evocative musical language with layers of meaning and resonance.

This poem consists of three parts, each with several sections and sub-sections. It uses variants of 10-syllable lines and “gliding blocks of stanzas” to frame the poet’s life as a series of vistas seen mostly in the third person—as if from train cars and windows. As though it is creating itself, the poem opens on a train to Pennsylvania: “the cars began to fill with pilgrims/while the book slept.” The reader is swept along quickly to “the idea of America” then past Baudelaire Station to “where Courbet lived.” Walcott takes the reader far, returning to his residence near the Hudson River in Manhattan’s Village, to favorite sites in Italy, and to his natal home in the Caribbean, St. Lucia. In addition to real landscapes, there is an overlay of literary vistas: “small farms conjugating Horace” and “olive trees as twisted as Ovid’s syntax…” He plays with words at every turn. Images may swerve from “peace that passes/like a changing cloud, to a hawk’s slow pivot.”

To my knowledge, no critic has yet discussed the duality of the title. Metaphorically, it suggests “The Prodigal Son”—the son who is chosen or special, but in some parables about siblings, the chosen one may be dissolute, reckless—or the first in line for sacrifice—and the negative meanings are another sense of prodigal. Throughout the poem, as in Part II, section 9, Walcott is mourning the loss of his twin brother and contemplating the “white city in my head” peopled with silent images of deceased family and friends. In Part III, section 15, the poet is in Milan, staring past the “stalagmites of the Duomo” at the “peaches of summer” “…bouncing on the grids of the Milanese sidewalks/in halters cut close to the coccyx.” He is frankly ogling the women; whatever one thinks of this behavior, he is frank about it, and his Cézannesque wordplay reveals the universal sexual geometry of the city and its members. Again, he interrupts the present to face thoughts of death:

Old man coming through the glass, who are you?
I am you. Learn to acknowledge me,
the cottony white hair, the heron-shanks,
and, when you and your reflection bend,
the leaf-green eyes under the dented forehead,
do you think Time makes exceptions, do you think
Death mutters, “Maybe I’ll skip this one”?
The same silent consequence that crept across
your brother perilously sleeping, and all the others
whose silence is no different from your brother’s.

Altogether, notions of time (“the quiet panic of clocks”), history, and “the death-mask of Fame” paint a constantly-shifting picture that contrasts mortality with a closing, beatific vision of angels, dolphins, and “that line of light that shines from the other shore.” This poem has imperfections and elations worth our time.

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On some Saturday afternoon in June or July 1964, I and a few of my buddies went to the Royal Theater, one of the movie houses in South Philadelphia that catered to a black clientele, to see Sidney Poitier in a film called The Long Ships. It was Poitier’s first movie since becoming the first black actor playing a lead to win an Oscar,1 for his performance in Lilies of the Field, released the previous year, a film with a black person that even my Italian Catholic friends had heard of.

No one was as excited about this new film as I was, for Poitier was my favorite actor. I had seen virtually every movie he had been in, some in the theater but mostly on television. I had watched Blackboard Jungle (1955), where he played a tough, street-smart kid who winds up helping out his white high school teacher and Something of Value (1957), where he played a young Mau-Mau, maybe six or eight times, enough to know every line he spoke by heart. I had seen his first film, No Way Out (1950), where he played a doctor fighting against a racist patient; Edge of the City (1957), where he played a dock worker who protects his white friend; The Defiant Ones (1958), where he was an escaped convict chained to a white racist; and of course, A Raisin in the Sun (1961), where he did his memorable turn as Walter Lee Younger, the frustrated son in a family dominated by women. My absolute favorite was his role as a tough marine sergeant in the Korean War film, All the Young Men (1960). He wins the war singlehandedly.

He was magnetic for me, an exemplar, an odd combination of an older brother or uncle and a saint. I tried to cock my head as he did, walk as he did, talk as he did, gesture as he did. And Poitier was from the Bahamas, the birthplace and home of my mother’s father who, with his four brothers, had come to this country when he was 20 and whose accent reminded me every day of another life, an island life. When I met my Bahamian relatives on occasion and heard their lilting accents, saw their high church Episcopalian ways, listened to their sweet laughter, witnessed their incredible work ethic, I felt that here were black people I wanted to be like and with whom I was joined, by influence and by tribe.

The only Sidney Poitier movie I hadn’t seen at the time was Porgy and Bess (1959), MGM’s blockbuster version of the Gershwin opera. I didn’t like musicals, I didn’t like operas, and I didn’t want to see him play a character who was on his knees, even if the movie was in color. I never wanted to see him look weak on the screen. So, I was especially excited about The Long Ships, not only because it was period adventure movie that promised a great deal of swashbuckling, and not only because he was to play a Moor (a highly romanticized figure in my childish mind) but also because it would be the first Technicolor Poitier film that I would see. Movies were always better in color.
It was no easy thing for me as an adolescent boy to go to the Royal Theater at 15th and South Streets to see Poitier movies or any other for that matter. I lived probably 12 blocks away, not very far, especially when measured by the short blocks of South Philadelphia. But I lived in the territory of the Fifth and Carpenter Streets gang of which I was not a member except by association. I knew guys in that gang and I lived in the neighborhood. (I knew guys from other gangs, too, but that’s another tale.) The theater was located in a neighborhood controlled by the 13th and Fitzwater Streets gang, a tough outfit. It was essentially a war between the youths of two big housing projects. Teenage gang warfare in Philadelphia in those days was so bad that it was an act of courage, bordering on the foolhardy, to leave your neighborhood and casually stroll, say, six or seven blocks in any direction. (It was far worse in North Philadelphia, the huge black ghetto that was called “The Jungle.” Later in the summer of 1964, a race riot would take place in North Philadelphia that would destroy its main shopping district on Ridge and Columbia Aves. You had to go to North Philly to see the fights at the Blue Horizon, the ballgames at Connie Mack Stadium, and the R&B shows at the Uptown, so it was important to me in my youth.) If you did leave the neighborhood and were confronted by members of a rival gang, you stood an excellent chance of losing your money, a decent chance of being beaten up and maimed, and a one-in-five chance of losing your life. (Those odds became decidedly worse as the decade wore on.) People stuck around “the address,” as the boys I knew called home, which made for some very provincial kids, who scarcely knew anything about the city in which they lived except the area their gang controlled.

Black boys in Philadelphia had a reputation for being tough. It was true and they deserved it. I knew three guys while growing up who became professional prizefighters; two, Muhammad Saad Muhammad and Jeff Chandler, both warlords for their respective gangs, became champions. It was a neighborhood where that kind of skill did you a lot of good, if you didn’t wind up dead or in prison, or on narcotics, the fate of most gang boys.

If you went to the Royal by yourself, you were asking to get “jacked up,” as the street lingo went. If you went with friends, you might still get hurt by rival gang members, and you also stood the risk of being harassed by the cops who thought any gathering of two or more black boys was a conference of the thugs or hoodlums, which was how black teenage boys were commonly referred to in the media and even in school—I heard it with my own ears—when I was growing up. Once you got to the theater, there were a few rules: Always sit with the people you came with; never go to the concession stand alone; and try to avoid the restroom unless a lot of adults were going there, too. (It was not uncommon for rival gangs to sodomize boys in restrooms.) It was far easier to go to the movies with my mother. I was less likely to be harmed, but I was 12 in 1964 and I didn’t want my friends to think I was a sissy. Going to the movies in those days, though, had it stresses. But for Sidney Poitier I was willing to take considerable risks. Besides, the theater was the only place we could go that was air-conditioned.

As it turned out, perhaps the risk was not worth it. Everyone hated the movie. As we left the theater, my friends commented loudly by turn:

“Man, you see that wig that put on my man Sidney. Damn, he looked like Little Richard. All he needed was a head-rag. Man, they had the brother looking messed up in that picture.”

“And they wouldn’t let him kiss the white babe, man. And she was his wife in the picture. The white guy [actor Richard Widmark], the Viking dude, runs off with my man Sidney’s wife. And she was wanting to get down with Sidney. And he come talking about he can’t be doing that. I said, man, what kind of weak stuff is this! Who’s gonna not get down with someone who looked like her?”

“Kiss her!? Man, they didn’t want him to touch the white babe. I didn’t think they wanted ‘em to be in the same movie! The white man wound up with everything, just like always. Sidney’s dead at the end of the picture and the white Viking dude gets the girl, and everything else. And they run my man Sidney over with a bell! Can you get that?! Kill my man with a great big bell. They didn’t even make him a good villain. I think them people making movies out there playing Sidney for a chump. They making Sidney Poitier into a lame.”

I was pretty upset with the movie, too upset to speak. Poitier was nearly a subject of ridicule in this film, and all the strong points of his acting worked against him. He looked foolish and weak. That embarrassed me deeply. What I had always liked about Poitier was that he played characters who were good and who had dignity, who offered understanding and empathy, and that he served as a bridge between the black world and the white world, that he could reach out and across to both. I wanted very much to do that myself, to be a sort of racial saint, for that is what I thought Poitier was. (I felt that way a little because I had Italian friends and blacks friends who loathed each other. I was the kid who brought them together, so I thought.) The Long Ships betrayed everything Poitier stood for as I understood him in my childhood and adolescence. I almost wanted to cry.

We stopped in a donut shop on South Street near 11th and ate a lot of chocolate-covered glazed donuts, washed down by pints of milk, keeping a lookout for 13th Street gang boys because we were still on their turf. TN, the oldest among us at 15, was still laughing about the movie:

“If Sidney don’t watch out, he’s gonna be just like them colored guys you see in the Three Stooges and them other old movies who are always busting down doors running from ghosts and getting all bug-eyed and all like that, saying ‘Yessir, Boss’ and ‘Feets don’t fail me now.’ Why, if Sidney don’t look out, he’ll be just like Stepin Fetchit and them. He’ll just be carrying water for white people.”

I finally spoke, in a choked, loud voice:

“He’s not no Stepin Fetchit! He doesn’t have a name like he’s a damn dog doing tricks. He’s Sidney Poitier. What kind of name is Stepin Fetchit? Sidney’s no clown. He’s an actor. He’s Sidney Poitier. His next picture will be good. You just wait.”

Then I added, after a moment:

“He don’t carry water for white people.”

TN could see that I was really upset, so he stopped joking.

“Yeah, man, you’re right,” he said soothingly. “All them big stars in Hollywood make bad pictures once in a while. I saw this movie with John Wayne once called The Alamo and fell asleep it
was so bad. And I like John Wayne movies. I bet Sidney's next one will be real good. Forget what I said. I was just funning."

After a long while, I spoke again:

"There was one good thing about that movie."

"What was that?" T'N asked.

"It was in color," I said. "That was pretty cool to see Sidney Poitier in color. I bet they never put Stepin Fetchit in a Technicolor movie."

My friends laughed and said:

"Yeah, it was pretty cool to see Sidney in color. Stepin Fetchit was way back in them Uncle Tom days. They didn't put black people in no color movies then."

We were not entirely right.

2. One-Eyed Jacks

I'd rather play a maid than be one.
—black actress Hattie McDaniel

I'm the only Negro actor who works with any degree of regularity. I represent 10,000,000 people in this country, and millions more in Africa.
—Sidney Poitier, 1967

Black actors Stepin Fetchit and Sidney Poitier may have had more in common than either realized; something that if either of them had thought about it would have struck them as an absurd irony as they were supposed to be total opposites, completely irreconcilable public images.

Fetchit, whose real name was Lincoln Perry, was the comic actor who created the slow-moving, slow-talking, seemingly dimwitted coon characterization whose heyday was the late 1920s and 1930s when he was the highest paid and most recognized black actor in the United States, indeed, probably in the world. Fetchit was a product of minstrelsy, vaudeville, the chit'ling circuit, and segregation. He was, in effect, the Old Negro. Fetchit reminds us, in the words of his biographer Mel Watkins, that "black minstrelsy … established itself as the cornerstone of African American performing arts."

Poitier, on the other hand, was the dramatic actor who created the persona of the dignified Negro, who showed his anger but contained it, an enabler and friend of whites, usually a decent and caring man on screen. His heyday was from about 1955 to 1970; and he, too, during his time because the most famous and highest paid black film actor in the world. Indeed, in one brief moment in his career, he was the number one box office attraction in the United States. Poitier did not do comedy and when he tried it, in the 1970s in a series of films he directed and starred in entitled Uptown Saturday Night (1974), Let's Do It Again (1975), and A Piece of the Action (1977), he was bad at it, even being a straight man to Bill Cosby. Poitier was a product of the Method, integration, and civil rights. As his biographer, Adam Goudsouzian put it, "The civil rights movement had shaped the contours of Poitier's career. Nonviolent demonstrations for black equality had forged a culture in which his image resonated, for his movies had engendered racial goodwill." Poitier was the New Negro, with no hint of the plantation darky about him. From this perspective, the men had little in common, except

Stepin Fetchit: in character, posing for a publicity still in a chauffeur’s uniform.

Stepin Fetchit: out of character, a high-style day at the beach with a lady friend and a retinue of servants.
the measure of success they achieved in a completely white-dominated field of endeavor.

But both men became trapped by the personas they created. Both were, at first, accepted, even lauded by black audiences but soon were criticized and rejected, not on artistic grounds as artists but on political grounds as unacceptable images. Or, put another way, the limitations of their art became a political liability for them. They were both undone by changing times, perhaps more disturbingly than many pop idols are—Fetchit by the rise of the civil rights movement and the black activism of the post-World War II era that propelled the career of Sidney Poitier; and Poitier by the Black Power movement that led to Melvin Van Peebles’s revolutionary independent film, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadass Song* (1971) and Gordon Parks’s *Shaft* (1971) and the Blaxploitation (violent ghetto) film craze that gave us Pam Grier and Fred Williamson and apparently fired the imagination of Quentin Tarantino. Both Fetchit and Poitier started out as path-breakers who wound up being seen as Uncle Toms, as Sambos, as Sell-outs. Theirs is the story of how especially complex and tricky it can be to be a black pop culture image in the United States, a house full of mirrors reflecting wildly in a number of directions. It was hard for both Fetchit and Poitier at times to know exactly what they were supposed to represent and to whom. Of course, they vigorously defended themselves when they were attacked, Fetchit manically so, even to the point of condemning the civil rights movement as misguided and communist inspired; and some of the attacks were cruel and venomous like Amiri Baraka’s satirical play, *The Sidney Poet Heroical In 29 Scenes*, written in 1969, staged in 1975, and published in 1979, which lambasted Poitier’s films, including his major one, *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), his only “straight” role which showed that he had greater possibilities as a dramatic actor than Poitier ever did as a comic one, are unavailable.

The men shared something else in common: They were both born in Florida. Fetchit (Perry) was born in Key West in 1902 and Poitier in Miami in 1927. Both had West Indian parents: Perry’s father was from Jamaica and his mother from the Bahamas. Both of Poitier’s parents were from the Bahamas. Perry was reared in poverty in the United States, and Poitier grew up desperately poor in the Bahamas until he left for Miami in 1943. Both left home as restless adolescents, who may have wound up as criminals or ne’er do wells, but entered the world of Negro theater where they learned the craft of performing in public. But the Negro theaters they entered were very different. Perry started out in medicine shows and working in carnivals, latching on here and there, doing comedy, pantomime, and dancing. The major black star of the day was Bert Williams (1874–1922), who wore blackface and did a brilliant turn at traditional minstrelsy. Perry learned this sort of thing. It must be remembered, as Waters reminds us, that Perry performed at this time largely before black audiences who accepted, indeed, enjoyed forms of humor at the time that most would find offensively stereotyped today. (Tricksterism, Fetchit’s stock in trade, the humorous resistance of the weak, is always greatly enjoyed by the weak until it is co-opted by the dominant group.) Finally, Perry wound up doing black vaudeville, traveling on the Theater Owners Booking Agency circuit, a route of black theaters in major cities across the country. It was difficult, grueling, at times degrading, paid less than white vaudeville with worse conditions for the performers. Only the strong stayed with it. Bessie Smith and Butterbeans and Susie, Buck and Bubbles and Moms Mabley. And Perry was nothing if not strong and determined to be a top-notch performer. Perry knew he was good, and he was hellbent for the world to know, too.

It was during the 1920s, that, with a partner, he developed an act called Step And Fetch It, named, he claimed, after a racehorse that finished in the money for him. Eventually, as he developed his laziest man in the world act, he dropped the partner and named the character, Stepin Fetchit, which became his permanent persona. He was also writing a column on the black entertainment world for the black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, as he was, by the middle 1920s, living in Los Angeles. He broke into film in 1927, just when sound arrived and just when Hollywood had an interest, albeit fleeting, in black cast films, and an interest in black music, which lasted a bit longer. Before the emergence of Stepin Fetchit and black cast films like *Hearts in Dixie* and King Vidor’s *Hallelujah* (1929), blacks virtually had no presence on the Hollywood screen. Typically, black roles in silent films were played by whites in blackface. It cannot be overestimated how revolutionary the emergence of Stepin Fetchit as a star really was. He, in essence, brought his stage act that he honed before black audiences for years to the screen. He was placed under contract and earned at least as much as $3,500 a week, a staggering sum for an African American at the time, who might typically be making a dollar or two a day, if he or she was lucky.

Fetchit played the star role to the hilt, living lavishly in grand houses with swimming pools, hiring Chinese servants, and driving around Central Avenue, the heart of black LA, in a fleet of late-model automobiles. Many of his black fans loved his flamboyance. His white fans rather thought he was the typical parvenu darky. He also became temperamental, insisting on playing his comic coon role in his way and insisting on being treated like a star who brought fannies into the seats. (He did not, for instance, like playing in films with other blacks because it diluted the impact of his presence.) His temperament eventually led to his demise in Hollywood as the white bosses grew tired of dealing with him. His spendthrift habits eventually led to bankruptcy. His career, after the mid-1930s, became a cycle of Fetchit being fired by a Hollywood studio and being forced to return to the stage and then after promising to behave, being permitted to return to film. This went on a few times before finally he outgrew his welcome and had spawned so many imitators that he was given the door and never asked to return. But Fetchit was able to make films, on and off, until the early 1950s (he remained a favorite of John Ford), exactly when Poitier emerged as a star, although Fetchit was, by then, clearly a relic. Also, by the early 1940s, under the leadership of Walter White and the NAACP, the black leadership began to press Hollywood to give blacks better roles and get rid of the coon, plantation stuff: the maids, butlers, lackeys, nappy-haired children named Buckwheat, Farina and Sunshine Sammy, the lazy, easily frightened sidekick (a la...
Willie Best with Bob Hope, Mantan Moreland in Charlie Chan movies, and Sam McDaniel in the Three Stooges shorts). Hollywood slowly but surely complied and thus ushered in the era of Poitier, Belafonte, Lena Horne, and Dorothy Dandridge, who were not comic maids, butlers, or lackeys. In fact, the NAACP scored its biggest victory in this realm when it forced the televised version of “The Adventures of ol’ Amos ‘N’ Andy” (1951-1953) off the air. But this effort to improve roles for black actors angered Hattie McDaniel, who won an Oscar for her performance as a faithful, sassy slave in Gone With the Wind (1939, incidentally, a color film), Louis Beavers, Clarence Muse, and others who had been playing these comic roles for years. But none was more angry than Fetchit, who bore most of the brunt of the criticism as the worst of the lot. It must be remembered that Fetchit was never bug-eyed and running from ghosts like Best, Moreland, and his other imitators; indeed, just as jazz pianist Thelonious Monk created the slowest tempos in Bebop, Fetchit created the slowest moving and slowest talking act in Hollywood. And unlike Bert Williams, he never had worn blackface, so he was not as completely a relic or reminder of minstrelsy as many thought.

As Fetchit and other black characters of the 1930s and 1940s flamed out, Poitier and other black dramatic actors appeared in the 1950s as leads. Poitier learned his craft in New York, a bastion of left-leaning liberalism, during the 1940s with outfits like American Negro Theater, headed by black former St. Louisan Frederick O’Neal. Poitier was taught to do serious, legitimate theater, although, other than doing Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun in 1959, he was never noted as a stage actor and felt more comfortable doing films. If the giant shadow that was cast on Fetchit was Bert Williams, then the giant shadow on Poitier was leftist singer/actor Paul Robeson, who was to experience his eclipse in America during the Cold War. Robeson personified the dignity of the committed, engaged black performer, something Poitier wanted to emulate. Poitier was in New York at a time of great black artistic fermentation, with Bebop jazz becoming a major force and spawning, through trumpeter Miles Davis, another major jazz expression, the Cool, with boxer Sugar Ray Robinson a major style-setter and male icon and Brooklyn Dodger star Jackie Robinson as the toast of the town, with writers like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin about to emerge as major artists and with Langston Hughes as the ever-present sage of Harlem. All of this was a republication of the Negro artistic and stylized past, while, at the same time, a kind of reassessment and reaffirmation of certain aspects of it. Poitier was no accident. He was a reflection of his time and his location. And if Poitier’s pub-

movie star.4 By the time he appeared in Richard Brooks’s controversial but popular youth film, Blackboard Jungle, he knew he could be a star. But the same vanguard anti-racist liberalism that had made his career possible also restricted what he could do on screen. He was trapped by centrist, anti-communist, white liberalism of the Cold War. (He was dogged by loyalty oaths throughout a good portion of the 1950s because of his friendship with and regard for Robeson.) Lead characters in Hollywood films tend to be isolated and unconnected; with Poitier this was exaggerated still more. He not only had no family and no past, not unusual for Hollywood, but he could have no love life, no cultural frame of reference or even cultural connection to the environment in which he operated in any way that mattered to his being in the film. From All the Young Men through films like The Bedford Incident (1965), The Slender Thread (1966), Lilies of the Field (1963), and A Patch of Blue (1965), all small, independently produced black and white films, he ceased to be a character in a film but, like Stepin Fetchit, operated as a persona who transcended any particular character. (Who can remember the names of any characters he played other than Walter Lee Younger and that was because Hansberry’s play was a bigger vehicle than he was?) This, too, was not unusual as many film stars, Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Elvis Presley transcended characters. But what was different was that Poitier, as Goudsouzian, his biographer, points out, became a symbol. Not in addition to anything else he was. He became just a pure symbol of anti-racist liberalism of a sincere if highly patronizing sort, becoming the Negro to whom whites could offer no objections. How could you object? He was a better human being than any white characters in his films! (Stanley Kramer’s 1967 film, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?, about interracial marriage that starred Poitier, Katherine Hepburn, and Spencer Tracy, can only be understood as a satirical gloss of Poitier’s persona as a symbol of racial understanding, of Poitier’s entire career as a revisionist black actor.) This brought reassurance to whites about integration,
which was important even if it was enacted and symbolized in a bizarre way where Poitier teetered between a glamorized martyr and a romanticized eunuch—his characters, for the most part, oozed both optimism and tempered innocence—for whites had to be taught to accept integration. And it was a valuable characterization as long as caring about how whites felt about integration mattered to blacks. Once it ceased to matter, and once blacks grew skeptical of integration and nonviolent protests, Poitier was not only no longer relevant, he was no longer even admirable.

In 1969, Poitier tried to revise his screen image in the film The Lost Man, playing a militant/activist who openly romanticizes his white female lead, Joanna Shimkus, who was later to become Poitier’s wife.1 The film, based on Carol Reed’s film about the Irish rebellion called Odd Man Out (1947), was a failure. (A year earlier, Jules Dassin remade the John Ford’s Irish rebellion film, The Informer, made in 1935, as a black film, Uptight, with the same commercial and critical results.) Poitier was simply not convincing in this sort of thing, and the public could not accept him in this way. In April of the same year, Donald Martin Lambright, Stepin Fetchit’s son from his second marriage, killed three people, including his wife, and wounded 15 others on the Pennsylvania Turnpike before he finally killed himself. Many believed, although it was unsupported by any facts, the son, who had become a black militant, had a nervous breakdown over the fact that Stepin Fetchit was his father. Perhaps, by this point, blacks had produced their own version of a Lost Generation, but it was difficult to discern which generation was lost: Fetchit’s, Poitier’s, or the young people of the 1960s who condemned them both. As my boyhood friend TN liked to tell me, “In the Kingdom of the Blind, the One-Eyed Jack is King.” And perhaps in the late 1960s, all of us black folk were one-eyed jacks, compensating for what we couldn’t see at all with the profoundly acuity of a warped perspective.

Both Goudsouzian and Watkins have written solid biographies of their subjects, and long overdue works they are, I might add. It is, in fact, striking that more biographies of the two men have not been written. Goudsouzian’s is the stronger of the two, providing a complete story of the making of nearly every Poitier film and a full account of the personal life including his two marriages, his long romance with black actress Diahann Carroll, his insecurities about his fame. But this may be more a reflection of the wealth of material that is available about the subject rather than the skill of the writer. There is simply less material about Fetchit than Poitier. Watkins gives us Fetchit’s complete career, including all the films he made, his stage tours, his marriages (three), and his anger, as he felt he had been completely misunderstood, demonized by white liberals and leftists who, he felt, had far too much influence in telling blacks how they were supposed to interpret their experience (a most interesting subject). Watkins apparently knew Fetchit personally. Watkins’s biography is certainly an excellent complement to and extension of his early book, On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy (1999). Goudsouzian’s book joins Donald Bogle’s biography of Dorothy Dandridge (Dorothy Dandridge, published in 1997) and Wil Haygood’s biography of Sammy Davis, Jr. (In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr., published in 2003), as outstanding works on black pop culture icons. It is to be hoped that more such work is coming down the pike.

Incidentally, Poitier hated The Long Ships. He thought it was the most embarrassing film he ever did, worse even than Porgy and Bess. I guess he was never much for period pieces in color.

Gerald Early

1 Black actor James Baskette received a special Oscar, posthumously, for his performance in Disney’s Song of the South, (1946)

2 The 1970s comedies that Poitier made in some respects vindicated him and resurrected his career with black audiences. They were clearly anti-Blaxploitation movies, showing the black community in a far more positive light than the other films of the period, which emphasized pimps, drugs, violence, and gangsterism. Black leaders had spoken out against Blaxploitation films, and black audiences seemed to have tired of them when Poitier’s light-hearted comedies appeared.

3 Stepin Fetchit was not the only black performer under contract to a major studio at the time. Indeed, the co-star in King Vidor’s Hallelujah! Nina Mae McKinney, was also under contract. With her good looks and abilities, many thought she would be a big star. Alas, the racism and sexism of the time did her in. She did appear with Paul Robeson in Alexander and Zoltan Korda’s Sanders of the River in 1935. Zoltan Korda would direct Poitier in Cry, the Beloved Country.

4 Why did Poitier succeed instead of some other black actor of the time like James Edwards who had starred in producer Stanley Kramer’s war drama Home of the Brave (1949) and had a meaty supporting role in Sam Fuller’s Korean War film, The Steel Helmet (1951) or William Marshall, whose sense of presence and rich baritone, gave him star potential? Marshall quite overshadowed Victor Mature in his supporting role in Demetrius and the Gladiators (1954), the sequel to The Robe (1953). Although Edwards was as handsome as Poitier and had greater range as an actor, he had a drinking problem and a bad attitude. He also slept with white starlets, not a good practice at the time. Marshall was perhaps too much of a physical presence. Poitier’s character always had a remarkable air of vulnerability. Poitier’s other rival, Harry Belafonte, with whom he had an on-again, off-again friendship over the years, appeared in several major films in the 1950s including Bright Road (1953), Carmen Jones (1955), Island in the Sun (1957), Odds Against Tomorrow (1959), and The World, the Flesh, and the Devil (1959). But the handsome star was picky about his roles, less willing to compromise. He refused to play Porgy, a role Poitier took. Belafonte also had a successful singing career to fall back on. Poitier had no musical talent (which at the time made him an unusual black pop culture presence). Of course, why did Poitier, as a male, succeed, but no black actress enjoyed his measure of longevity and success is a subject for another essay.

5 Until he starred in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, Poitier’s 1960s movies always teased its audience with the hint or threat of miscegenation such as A Patch of Blue, Lilies of the Field, The Slender Thread, To Sir, With Love (1967), by placing him in intimate but platonic situations with white women. His sexual restraint reassured whites that integration on the part of the Negro was not about sex with white women, which was their number one fear. Nonetheless, Poitier’s films did not play in the deep South until the latter part of the 1960s. As a result, his films always had to be modestly budgeted in recognition of this major market loss. His large black following compensated for this loss to some degree. Stepin Fetchit films, by contrast, were popular in the white South.

17
Audience and the Difference It Makes

This address by Stanley Fish was given at the Third Annual Faculty Book Celebration on December 2, 2004.

I was participating in a conference at Columbia University in the Fall of 2001, and the panel I had signed up for was about to begin, when I was paged by an editor at The New York Times. The Times had accepted an op-ed piece of mine explaining why postmodernism was not responsible for the attack on the World Trade Center. It was to appear the next day; I had already agreed to a number of changes, and assumed that there was nothing more to do. But here she was on the phone telling me that she wanted to cut my best bits and re-arrange others. We went back and forth for a few minutes as I eyed the clock nervously; and finally I said in exasperation, “I get it: you want me to get rid of all the wise-ass and self-indulgent parts.” Yes, she replied, and after a second or two of contemplation, it was a dramatic gesture — “the integrity of my prose and of my argument is more important to me than appearing in The New York Times” — I caved completely, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

What can one say about this small moment in history? Well, first of all, one can say that appearing in The New York Times was important to me. Why? Because hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of people read The New York Times, and if I had a point I wanted the public to understand The Times editor was right. The bits she wanted to discard were clever, or at least I thought so, and what I would be giving up was the opportunity to parade my cleverness, and along with my cleverness my superiority.

Take, for example, the first sentence of the piece as originally composed:

“Are you now or have you ever been a postmodernist?”

What’s wrong with this as I now see (although I was infatuated with it at the moment of invention) is what would have been right about it had it been the opening of an academic essay: It is allusive. And because it is allusive—one is supposed to hear in the background the famous question put to witnesses by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy era — it asks for work on the part of those who consume it. The reader who does not hear in the background “Are you now or have you ever been a communist?” will fail to appreciate the full force of what follows — “It’s only a matter of time before people who say things like ‘there are no universal standards of judgment’ are asked to turn in their washrooms keys, resign their positions, and go join their terrorist comrades in some cave in Afghanistan.” Or, in other words, McCarthyism is back. We professors are once again its victims; and middle-brow media venues like the New York Times are supplying the chorus to the new hue and cry. Of course the Times editor wasn’t going to allow even an indirect aspersion on her employers, and she cut that bit along with a list of prominent commentators—most of them New York Times regulars—who were brought forward as examples of ignorant and opportunistic journalism: Roger Rosenblatt, Peter Beinert, Leonard Peikoff, John Leo, Edward Rothstein, and, for good measure, Mayor Giuliani. By rehearsing that list in a tone of sarcastic dismissal, I was doing two things academic writers often do and are expected to do: I was declaring that I was infinitely smarter than those guys, and I was rebuking any reader who might have been taken in by their empty fulminations. And all of this was being done before I got to my main point. I was, in effect, clearing my throat, but not without a purpose. The purpose was to establish my polemical authority in advance of the delivery of any polemic, and I did this, or tried to do it, by clearing the field of any adversaries, so that when my main point did finally arrive, there would be no one left standing who could contest it.

The military vocabulary of the last sentence — “clearing the field,” “adversaries,” “no one left standing”— is no accident of style; it is a recognition of the fact that academic writing is almost always agonistic, a form of warfare in which the objective is to destroy the enemy’s position and incidentally (but not always so: sometimes there is real animus at work) his or her career. This objective is usually not explicitly announced. Instead one resorts to any number of standard, and transparent, circumlocutions: You say “there is much to be learned from Professor X’s analysis, and on many points he is right; but on one point he is wrong, and, unfortunately, it is the central one.” Or you say, “among those writing today on this important topic, Professor X is certainly the most prominent; but I am afraid that his reputation, large though it is, rests on a mistake.” Or you say, “In recent
years, much of what has been said about this momentous issue has taken Professor X’s arguments as a point of departure; unfortunately the result is that we have been led down the proverbial garden path.” (This last neatly dispatches both Professor X and all those who were foolish enough to follow him.) Any of these openings—each an example of damning with faint praise—sets up the next step, which is to consider and then demolish any thesis that might be thought of (mistakenly of course) as a rival to your own. This often takes a very long time, but when you have fired your last shot, you have the satisfaction of knowing that the victory is completely, and uncontestedly, yours. How delicious!

Something of the flavor of this combat—done with words not swords—can be gathered from a piece of advice given by the great literary theorist William Wimsatt to his students (of whom I was one): “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes.” Not original with Wimsatt, of course, this amounts to saying, don’t put your main point to the test of battle until you have won all the preliminary skirmishes; then, when the enemy is disarmed or distracted or outmaneuvered, ram it home. Or, in other words, save your big argument, your coup de grace, for the end. Sure enough, my big argument—that postmodernist thinking does not deprive us of a basis for responding to terrorist attacks—was securely tucked into the last paragraph of my piece as initially written, and had it remained there—the editor insisted, wisely, on putting it up front—few of my readers would ever have gotten to it, for they would have tired of reading something without knowing what, if any, point it served.

No matter how good Wimsatt’s advice may be for academic writers (and I have my own doubts about that), it is disastrous advice for those who would write for a general audience. This is true, in part, because the audience is general, which is another way of saying you don’t know who’s in it. You always know who’s in the audience for academic writing, people who are as obsessed as you are about a particular subject, people who think you’re right, people who are certain you’re wrong, people who want to learn their craft by watching you practice it, people who would like to topple you from your pedestal and take your place; all of these—and several other related types—have reason to wait around while you strike this posture and that, meander here and there, display your learning, score a few cheap points, do a little dance of triumph. Members of an academic audience have a prior investment in what you are going to say that leads them to endure all kinds of nonsense on the way to receiving the news you claim to bring. This is especially the case with respect to law review articles; for as the writer of one of these curiosities, you really do know who’s in your audience—the other 500 people who care about section 2.202 of the Uniform Commercial Code (about which I once wrote an essay). Short law review articles run about 150 pages; long law review articles can easily top 300. Part of the explanation for this wasteful devastation of untold forests is the convention, almost always honored, of rehearsing the history of Western thought from the pre-Socratics to John Rawls before you actually say anything. Experienced readers of these monstrosities, however, know that at the end of it all will be a one and a half page conclusion; and if you have something really important to do you can save time by skipping the tens of thousands of words that come before it. Of course, if buried in those many words is a two or three page discussion of your own contribution to this deathless question, you may have to plow your way through the whole thing. And you will.

The situation is quite different if your audience is general. The big difference is that while a particular audience is yours before you begin, a general audience, an audience made up of persons who have no particular reason to stay with you, has to be built by you on the fly. And the only way to do this is to draw your readers in immediately, to bait your hook with a morsel on which they’ll bite; and that morsel should be nothing less than the main thing you have to say. Rather than waiting until you see the whites of their eyes, you have to lead off with everything you’ve got; rather than tantalizing with the promise of what you might finally deliver, you have to give it away—all of it—in your first sentence. Here is the first sentence of a recent Times op-ed (November 21):

It seemed somehow fitting, and fittingly sad, that Colin Powell saw his resignation accepted as secretary of state on the day marines completed their conquest of Fallujah, ensuring that the televised snapshots of glory drawn from his long public career would be interspersed with videotape of American troops presiding over scenes of devastation in a far-off and intractable war.

I note, but will not linger on, the compact elegance of this sentence, jump-started twice by two present participles ("ensuring that the televised snapshots,” presiding over scenes of devastation”) and moving with a seeming inevitability to the casual but firm judgment that this war is intractable. My main interest, however, is in the way the sentence sends its tentacles out in search of several audiences: first the large audience (at least among Times readers) interested in Colin Powell and perhaps still reacting to his resignation; then the equally large audience concerned with the Iraq war in general and the assault on Fallujah in particular; then the audience that remembers Desert Storm and Powell’s role in the decision of the first Bush administration not to march to Baghdad in order to capture Saddam Hussein; then the audience that recalls Powell’s role in Vietnam where he first rose to prominence; and finally the audience, extremely large, that has an opinion on the current war and on the question of whether or not it can be won. As the sentence draws these audiences in, it is doing other work, first by playing on the words “fitting” and “fittingly”—it is fitting and fittingly sad—which has
the effect of highlighting without explaining the sadness. If we get through this first sentence, we desire the explanation, which means that we will be willing to read the next sentence, and after that the next, and so on until the end. When that end is reached, everything that has been said will have been telegraphed by this first sentence. The reader who, for some reason, has to stop before the end will not have missed anything, and he or she will be able to talk about the op-ed for several days, as my wife talked about this one to me, although she never finished it.

But that will be about it. Four days, maybe five if you're lucky and they print some letters on the third day, is the shelf-life of this kind of thing. The upside is that the rush is immediate; your friends call you; your mother calls everybody; people say nice things on the elevator, and then, nothing. Someone else is getting the calls; someone else's mother is happy. Of the pieces I have written for the *Times*, only one stuck around for awhile and is still cited, much to my chagrin. It was a response to the hoax perpetrated by a physicist named Alan Sokal. Sokal had submitted an essay purporting to establish a congruence between Derridean poststructuralism and theoretical physics to the journal *Social Text*, then published by the press of which I was the executive director. On the day of its publication Sokal announced, in another journal, that he had made up the whole thing, and declared that the success of his ruse exposed the bankruptcy of postmodern thinking. I replied by calling what he had done immoral and destructive of the trust on which the academic community depends. Hundreds of readers wrote in fury, vilifying me and my kind. Flacks for the always complacent and self-congratulatory *New York Review of Books* took up the cudgels; a couple of enterprising academics put together an anthology which led to the production of a rival anthology, and suddenly I was in danger of living forever.

Of course, living forever, or at least for 20 or 30 years, is what you hope for when you do academic writing. The questions to which you offer an answer did not arise yesterday, as they do in the op-ed world. (Two summers ago I was asked to produce a commentary on Clarence Thomas's dissent in the Michigan affirmative action case in less than 24 hours; I did it.) They have been around for decades, sometimes for centuries. When I write something on Milton's God, I join a conversation that has been going on since the beginning of the 18th century when critics like Joseph Addison addressed the question. If I am up-to-date enough, and provocative enough, I can reasonably look forward to many years of being summarized, praised, vilified, replied to, anthologized, and many more years of being cited in summaries of the relevant scholarship, and then a twilight period when I will appear in the first footnotes before migrating to the bibliography of works consulted, but not discussed. By that time I may be dead or deep into dementia, but I will have a kind of half life before my name and memory fall into the abyss of time.

When I put it that way I think it may be better to go with the short-lived but intensely experienced pleasure of being read today and forgotten tomorrow, especially since there is a side benefit to writing for the popular press: It improves mental health. An old witticism opines that nothing concentrates the mind like a hanging; but in fact something does: the requirement that you say something people will want to read in 600 words or less. It takes an academic 600 words to say “hello.” The last book I published tallies more than 600 pages. To make a real point, develop it, support it, protect it against imagined objections and to do it without complicated syntactic structures, relative pronouns, and extended metaphors, all in fewer words than some of your longer footnotes—that's a real challenge and one you will not be able to meet unless you are operating at the peak of your powers. The conventional wisdom that in order to write for the popular press you have to dumb-down and forget about complexity is simply wrong.

What you have to do is distill a complicated issue into its most basic terms and then you have to present those terms—pared down but not diluted—in prose that is accessible to anyone. In short—and this is a lesson that must be relearned every time—you have to cut out all the wise-ass and self-indulgent parts.

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Our Own Voices: Review of WU Faculty Book
The Power of the Word and the Power of Its Context

Rebecca Rogers is Assistant Professor of Education in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St Louis. She uses ethnoanalytic and discourse analytic approaches to understand the relationships between literate subjectivities, literate contexts, and teacher and student learning. Rogers locates her research within the social traditions of New Literacy Studies and Critical Discourse Studies. Her work extends these approaches by closely studying the discourse patterns that comprise learning in various contexts (e.g. school, home, and community) and across the lifespan.

New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum

This is an important and welcome book; important because it combines the complexity of the ethnographic methodology with the rigor of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and also, welcome, in that it tests CDA in an ethnographic context. Rogers's generous exposition of her methodological journey and her heuristic explorations, enables all those with an interest in the pedagogy of family literacy as well as educational research, opportunities for insightful readings.

Critical Discourse Analysis is commonly identified with the work of Norman Fairclough, and in particular, Lilie Chouliaraki and Fairclough’s Discourse in Late Modernity (1999). It has as its roots work in critical linguistics and systemic functional linguistics, and focuses on texts as traces of social practices (Rowse 2000). CDA offers an account of discursive representations and orders of discourse that enables the researcher to look at power. Rogers acknowledges fully her debt to both Fairclough and James Paul Gee in setting up the theoretical constructs of this book. Rogers is one of the few researchers, along with Karin Tusting (2000), who combines CDA with ethnography—a combination that has immense potential in analysing texts in a situated and context-full manner. As Fairclough (2003) writes,

To research meaning-making, one needs to look at interpretations of texts as well as texts themselves, and more generally at how texts practically figure in particular areas of social life, which suggests that textual analysis is best framed within ethnography. (Fairclough 2003:15)

An example of this in Rogers’s book is when she combines an analysis of a meeting in which the daughter of the family she describes, Vicky, was assigned Special Education status in her new school, thus meaning that Vicky would not have access to mainstream secondary education. Rogers combines rigorous CDA, examining the discursive contradictions and different stylistic conventions conveyed in the meeting with detailed ethnography of the events leading up to the meeting. At the heart of Rogers’s analysis is power. She describes how a black, working-class family is beaten by a white middle-class school system, despite the family's belief in that system. Rogers offers a nuanced account of the meeting, using discourse analysis, stressing that 'what is left out' is as important as what is present (Rogers p. 8). Rogers adds to her analysis a social practices view of literacy from the New Literacy Studies thus enabling her to identify different domains of literacy, including school and home, and identifying that Vicky was actually actively involved in a number of complex literacy practices out of institutional school settings.

In the book, Rogers’s focus is on one family, the Treaders, the mother, June, and particularly her daughter Vicky, as she goes through the stigmatizing entry into Special Education. Rogers feels deeply implicated but also observes this process, drawing on her position as a researcher to try to support the family through the process but also standing back and analysing the relations of power that lie around the procedure itself. The section in which she documents the meeting should be required reading for all Special Needs Co-ordinators and those involved in Special Education.

The reason this book is so unusual is that there is a paucity of research in the area of family literacy practices, and part of the strength of this book is a detailed ethnography of one family’s literacy practices. Rogers uses her detailed observation of the Treader family’s life to build up a picture of a family who constructs many of its literacy practices in relation to ‘schooled’ literacy practices, but also has strong powerful literacy practices which are under-valued in the ‘schooled’ domain (Street and Street 1991). Rogers takes from the ethnographies of Heath (1983) and David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998) but adds the theoretical rigor of CDA to her study. This enables the analysis to examine power. Ethnographies of literacy have been critiqued by James Collins and Richard Blot (2003) for lacking a focus on issues around power. Collins and Blot refer to the studies by Street and Heath (Collins and Blot 2003), but argue that these studies do not take into account work that considers wider social theory such as that of the French theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (Collins and Blot 2003). Collins and Blot could have added that Rogers’s work can be placed within the space of the ‘post’ New Literacy Studies, which is beginning to include analysis of literacy practices and power. In this endeavour, Rogers has affinities with Bartlett and Holland’s analysis of literacy and power in Brazil (Bartlett and Holland 2002).

At the heart of Rogers’s book is a very carefully described account of a meeting between a group of professionals, her research subjects, Vicky the daughter, and June the mother, and herself in which Vicky is assigned to Special Education, thus
Rogers's focus on literacy and literacy practices makes this an ideal study for any student of literacy to read. Courses dealing with literacy and family and community literacy would find this a particularly useful book. Possibly Rogers does not fully address the burgeoning field of multimodality, but this was outside the scope of her research (Kress 2003). Likewise, Rogers eschews the recent work of local/global literacies, preferring to focus on an axis of home/school, and on the practices and processes that inform the stigmatization of black children within the school system (Brandt and Clinton 2002). Rogers also does not specifically consider the concept of ‘family literacy,’ which could be defined as being the programs offered to families within a ‘schooled system’ which consist of remedial programs for mostly mothers and children. Instead, this is a carefully constructed account of one family’s literacy practices in relation to institutions and schools.

Nevertheless, this is a unique book, which deftly combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with ethnography. It reveals the value of CDA, and how it can throw up analysis of power in relation to the concept of orders of discourse. Rogers also offers a methodological argument for offering one case study as a ‘telling case’ and gives the qualitative research argument a stronger case by describing such detailed, high quality research.

References


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The Many Faces of CARMEN

Translation Series
Symposium:
The Many Faces of Carmen

Sponsored by the Center for the Humanities and the Department of Music at Washington University
The Many Faces of Carmen

Introduction

Carmen the woman—independent, self-assured, sensual, superstitious. Prosper Mérimée created this character in 1845, publishing his story in four parts in *La Revue des deux mondes.* Mérimée’s story is narrated by an amateur French archaeologist who has traveled to Spain hoping to uncover a Roman battlefield. He first encounters a man he believes to be the renowned bandit José-María, to whom he reacts sympathetically, and then the Gypsy Carmen who entangles him in her seductive web. He soon discovers that José and Carmen are lovers. Months later the narrator speaks to José again, now in a jail cell where José is waiting to be hanged for Carmen’s murder. José tells his fateful story, which the reader experiences as a story within a story, or “framed narrative.”

Nineteenth-century French writers such as Mérimée, Hugo, and Balzac cultivated stories of the exotic, uncivilized “other” world, at least in part because the stories lent them a framework for examining their own society’s bourgeois attitudes towards people of different ethnicity and class. As Evlyn Gould argues, these writers brought into focus the French nation’s struggle against the pressures of internationalization. The principal groups classified as Oriental—Gypsies and Jews—circulated in French society and were regarded by many as “foreign parasites.” Furthermore, the periodic uprisings in Paris in 1830, 1848, and 1870 reminded the bourgeoisie that the lower class posed a threat to their established social hierarchy. These concerns intersected with the issue of sexual license; legal prostitution was thriving in Paris as hundreds of poor, homeless women turned to prostitution for survival. Gypsies, women singers, dancers, models—all were linked to prostitution, an institution that threatened bourgeois sensibilities. Sexual license, lower-class rebellion, and ethnic “otherness” are combined in the character of Carmen.

As we reexamine Mérimée’s story, his ambivalence towards Carmen is evident. He prefaces the story with a Greek epigraph, decipherable to only the educated male readers of the time: “Every woman is bitter as bile, but each has two good moments, one in bed and the other in the grave.” But Mérimée’s Carmen is not a mere *femme fatale,* highly intelligent, she actually leads the smugglers, is a skilled linguist who has so mastered languages that the narrator cannot determine her place of origin, and acts as a healer to anyone in need. She is, in short, a complex individual. Of respectable middle-class birth, Don José is no match for her; when he can not possess her, he kills her. But Mérimée did not simply leave the story with the dominant, sexually liberated woman eliminated and the social order restored. In the 1847 edition he added a final chapter in which the narrator describes the Gypsies’ appearance and habits in unflattering terms. He further claims that he knows Romany, the language of Gypsies, though in his encounter with Carmen, he clearly felt vulnerable because he couldn’t match her range of linguistic skills. It is as if Mérimée wants to kill off any lingering sense of how Carmen seduced the narrator (read Mérimée); but so obvious is the ploy that the reader is fully convinced of her lingering attraction.

In 1872 Bizet appropriated the story when he was commissioned to write a work for the Opéra-Comique in Paris. Given that productions at the *Opéra-Comique* never ended with a death scene, and that seduction was not a proper topic for its bourgeois audience, Bizet set himself a difficult task. He added Micaela as a wholesome antithesis to Carmen. Whereas Mérimée’s narrator first encounters José as a bandit and murderer, the opera introduces him as a relatively innocent soldier from a bourgeois background, hence *Don José.* Carmen now does not lead the smugglers, but is merely a follower. Carmen becomes less interesting than in the novella as Bizet and his librettists Halévy and Meilhac enhance her seductiveness at the expense of her intelligence and healing powers. Bizet’s music paints her as exotic when she performs Spanish-flavored songs such as the *Habanera* and *Seguidilla.* Significantly, the *Habanera* that Bizet borrowed and other similar pseudo-folk compositions were popular in Paris in the cabarets and café-concerts frequented by working-class and bohemians—thus Carmen’s “otherness” is not only of ethnicity, but also of social class. By using this music...
Bizet ultimately kept alive the very ambivalence towards Carmen that Mérimée had introduced: While the male bourgeois spoke out against such corrupting lower-class entertainments and female performers, many were secretly tantalized and drawn to them. Carmen’s sense of sexual freedom brought into the audience’s consciousness their own repressed desires. What shocked some titillated others.

In the 20th century Carmen has continued to tantalize our imaginations. By 1948 at least 16 different Carmen films had been produced, and since then, new productions on the stage and screen have continued to proliferate, each influenced by the prevailing attitudes towards female sexuality at a given moment in time. But issues of political ideology, race, and class have also been addressed by directors, and add to the richness of the characterizations. What happens to Carmen’s portrayal when an all-black cast is used, such as in Otto Preminger’s 1954 Carmen Jones, which presents Bizet’s music relatively intact, or in a revisionist production set in Nazi Germany? How does an audience react to hearing only snippets of Bizet’s music in Godard’s film Prénom: Carmen, which nonetheless reflects constantly on the myth of Carmen as it addresses the larger issues of innocence and guilt, and on music as a primordial force? How is our future experiencing of Bizet’s Carmen affected when a theater director challenges the storyline itself, particularly its acknowledgment of fate?

What follows are several interpretations of the Carmen story. Jeff Smith is director of the Film and Media Studies at Washington University. He has written on Preminger’s film Carmen Jones, itself based on Oscar Hammerstein’s successful Broadway adaptation of the Bizet opera. Dan Friedman is dramaturg for the Castillo Theater in New York and author of some 14 plays. Between 1987 and 1997 the Castillo Theatre presented five productions of three different Carmen-based scripts, all responses to Bizet’s opera. Evlyn Gould is CAS Distinguished Professor of Romance Languages at the University of Oregon. In 1996 she published a book entitled The Fate of Carmen, which examines various aspects of the Carmen retelling in opera and film. She focuses here on two recent interpretations, Jean Luc Godard’s film Prénom: Carmen and Robert Townsend’s MTV Production: Carmen: Hip-Hopera.

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Race and the Question of Voice
Dubbing in Otto Preminger’s Carmen Jones

In the 1970s, American fans of Kung Fu cinema developed an appreciation of the genre that balanced an almost equal measure of interest in their balletic fight sequences and their comically inept dubbing of the Chinese actors’ voices. Although most people would view this phenomenon as an expression of the specialized tastes of cult fans, they also might fail to realize that the dubbed voices at which they are laughing are more the norm of film production than they might think. With rare exceptions, almost all films involve some type of dubbing. For years, the sound for Hong Kong and Italian films were almost always post-synchronized after shooting was completed. In Hollywood, because of the difficulties of getting clean location sound, the dialogue is usually recorded on site during production, but then some of it is dubbed over later through a process called “looping.”

Of course, some films also used dubbing for more specific purposes. Perhaps the most notorious of these involve the dubbing of an actor’s singing voice, a practice that was never particularly common in Hollywood, but not that unusual either. Marni Nixon, for example, made a name for herself as the offscreen singing voice of several Hollywood stars, most notably Natalie Wood in West Side Story (1963) and Audrey Hepburn in My Fair Lady (1964). The ostensible reason for dubbing the actor’s voices is, quite simply, that the actor does not possess the necessary musical skills for such a performance. (Listen to the awful caterwauling of Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin in Paint Your Wagon (1969) or Robin Williams and Shelley Duvall’s tuneless warbling in Popeye (1980), and you’ll know what I mean.) But this raises a question about Otto Preminger’s production of Carmen Jones (1954), which is perhaps the most unusual and interesting example of dubbing in Hollywood’s history. Both of the film’s leads, Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte, were talented musicians. So why would someone dub their singing voices in Carmen Jones?

Few people may remember it today, but it was widely known at the time of the film’s production that many of the singing voices heard in Carmen Jones were, in fact, supplied by the offscreen talent. Of the film’s principal cast members, only Pearl Bailey and Olga James were given the opportunity to both sing their roles and play them onscreen. James was a young, pretty Juilliard-trained opera singer, and thus, a natural choice to play the role of Cindy Lou. For the other major singing roles, the producers made at least some effort to use classically trained African-American performers. For example, LeVerne Hutcherson, who sang the part of Joe for Harry Belafonte, played the male lead in a successful Broadway revival of Porgy and Bess just prior to the release of Carmen Jones. (In fact, although Porgy’s numbers were outside of his natural vocal range, Hutcherson was typecast in the role for many years afterward, and it eventually became almost the only part that he could get as an operatic male lead.) Despite this general emphasis on African-American performers, the producers of the film version of Carmen Jones broke with a precedent established by its Broadway incarnation by casting several white opera singers as members of the chorus, and more importantly, as the offscreen voice of Dorothy Dandridge’s Carmen. Director Otto Preminger cast the then unknown Marilyn Horne as the singing voice of Carmen Jones’s titular character. Horne was only 19 years old at the time, and acknowledges that this opportunity was an important stepping stone on her path toward superstardom in the world of opera.

Over the years, several explanations have surfaced to justify this decision. In publicity materials prepared for Carmen Jones, 20th Century-Fox claimed that Dandridge and Belafonte were cast for their looks rather than their musical abilities. In a pressbook item entitled “Singers to Spare their looks rather than their musical abilities.” Crediting Preminger for the decision to dub, the pressbook went on to say that the substitution of operatic voices for the voices of Dandridge and Belafonte “works beautifully,” largely because the previous singing experience of the two leads enables them to do a more natural and believable job in lip syncing the songs.

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In the years that followed the release of Carmen Jones, two additional rationales arose to bolster the studio’s original explanation. The first is that Dandridge and Belafonte were popular singers whose voices lacked the necessary skills and training to perform opera. Dandridge, of course, had been a successful cabaret performer before her star turn in Carmen Jones while Belafonte was a popular calypso performer singing hits like “The Banana Boat Song.” Moreover, the emphasis on the operatic character of Carmen Jones was a feature of the production from its very inception. When Broadway showman Billy Rose announced in 1942 that he planned to mount an all-black theatrical production of Carmen, the New York Herald Tribune ran an item that stated, “CARMEN JONES will be presented with an all-Negro
Dandridge, directed by Otto Preminger, and Carmen Jones starring Dorothy Carmen Jones

Bailey's performance is, in fact, preceded by a marvelous drum solo by bebop legend, Max Roach, and gives the viewer a taste of the "swing opera" that Carmen Jones might have been if Billy Rose had not remained so doggedly faithful to Bizet's music. The frenzied, polyrhythmic pulse of Roach's drum solo gives way to the very measured eighth note patterns of "Beat Out Dat Rhythm." As the camera tracks in slightly to reframe Frankie, she takes a drink, shakes her head, and begins to sing about the primitive force of the drummer's rhythms. Hammerstein's lyrics here indicate that Frankie enjoys the "sweetness in the music," but that such "sweetness" appeals to her emotions rather than her physical being. Instead, it is the "thump, thump, thumping of the bass, the bump, bump, bumping of the music" that stirs Frankie's desire to dance. Indeed, as the song's chorus indicates, rhythm is the only element needed to install this desire. As long as the musicians "beat out dat rhythm on a drum," Frankie "don't need no tune at all."

Surrounded by the shimmying and shaking limbs of other dancers, Pearl Bailey's performance of "Beat Out Dat Rhythm" brings together several signifiers of "blackness" as it was understood in post-WWII American culture. The tune's self-consciously "primitive" rhythm, the lyrics' references to African jungles, the wild dancing, and the linkage between musical and bodily expressiveness all serve to link African-American culture with the culture of its origins, which according to the song, may be found in the deepest regions of the so-called dark continent. By conforming to the most obvious stereotypes about African-American culture as earthier, more sensual, more libertine, more natural, "Beat Out Dat Rhythm" functions to establish the exoticism and Otherness of African-American culture that lies at the heart of Carmen Jones.

Bailey sings her own part, because Frankie, more than any other character, must bear the burden of Carmen Jones' construction of racial identity. In one sense, Bailey must sing with her own voice since it is both Frankie and Max Roach who come to embody an indigenous tradition of African-American musical performance. It is only through the use of Bailey's actual voice that Carmen Jones can make any claim toward an "authentic" portrayal of black American culture. This, however, is not the case with Dorothy Dandridge's Carmen or Harry Belafonte's Joe. As the opera's archetypal "tragic couple," their cultural status within the canon of Western music could not be compromised by the use of popular, or more specifically, African-American, musical styles. By this point in the opera's history, Carmen had come to symbolize the virtues and aesthetics of European-Anglo culture rather than the Orientalism and decadence of Gypsies and cabarets. Given Carmen's cultural pedigree and the pressures placed on the production by Bizet's estate, the decision to dub Dandridge and Belafonte's voices with those of classically trained opera singers must have seemed like a "no-brainer." More importantly, by juxtaposing the voice of Pearl Bailey with those of trained opera singers, Carmen Jones establishes a cultural hierarchy of musical styles in which the studied, cultivated performances of classical singers superevne upon the "natural" and "spontaneous" style of jazz or pop singing.
Yet, if race proved to be the central factor in the decision to dub the singing voices of Belafonte and Dandridge, Carmen Jones’s technological rendering of minstrelsy proves to be far more complicated than it appears on the surface. By severing the “natural” link between black bodies and black voices, the dubbed voices in Carmen Jones appear to question the very categories of race that were circulating in American culture in the 1950s. Through the possibilities offered by the process of post-synchronization, Carmen Jones juxtaposes two quite different systems of race relations that are correlated with this technological separation of sound and image. On the screen, Carmen Jones presents an image of total segregation, one that situates black representations within idealized, often rural landscapes that systematically deny the presence of race relations or of any larger social context. On the soundtrack, however, Carmen Jones mixes the voices of black and white performers in a manner that some of its performers perceived as a peculiar kind of racial integration. This notion that the soundtrack offered an alternative political paradigm is suggested by Marilyn Horne’s recollection of her participation in the film. At the time, Horne was an aspiring opera singer struggling to begin a career as a performer within the Los Angeles area. When the news of the film adaptation of Carmen Jones began to circulate in Hollywood, Horne and her friends assumed that they need not even audition for parts knowing that the film would adhere to Oscar Hammerstein’s conception of it as an all-black musical. But Horne and her friends were pleasantly surprised to find out that there was no color barrier—Whites could apply.7

While Horne’s anecdote suggests the kinds of double standards that typically operated to enable white participation in black cultural production, her observation that there was no “color barrier” nonetheless resonates with the emerging politics of the period. Although Carmen Jones depicts a space of racial segregation on its image track, its soundtrack reflects the prospects of desegregation as an issue associated with the Civil Rights movements of the ’50s and ’60s. Blacks and whites could not intermingle in the diegetic world of Carmen Jones, but their voices could, and did, intermingle in nondiegetic and extradiegetic spaces on the soundtrack. Indeed, one could argue that Marilyn Horne and LeVern Hutcherson functioned as an interracial couple as Carmen and Joe on the soundtrack, a possibility that resonates with Horne’s own personal experience at the time of Carmen Jones’s production. When she auditioned for the role of Carmen, Horne was romantically involved with her future husband, Henry Lewis, who, in 1960, became the first African-American conductor to lead a major orchestra in a regular concert.8

Released within a few months of the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in Brown v. the Board of Education, Carmen Jones is, thus, peculiarly Janus-faced in its treatment of race: its visual elements are an ignominious reminder of Black America’s past, but its soundtrack was viewed by some of its singers as a space free of color barriers, one that spoke to the hopes and aspirations of a more truly egalitarian future for both blacks and whites. Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte may have been silenced on Carmen Jones’s soundtrack, but in the years that followed, they both proved to be highly visible symbols of Black America’s desire for opportunity, equality, and justice. And that ultimately may be Carmen Jones’s most important legacy.

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3 Pressbook for Carmen Jones, Margaret Herrick Center for Film Research, Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.

4 Item from the Billy Rose Collection, New York Library for the Performing Arts.

5 Carmen Jones clipping file, Margaret Herrick Center for Film Research, Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. I should note here that I first encountered this explanation in relation to Porgy and Bess (1959) rather than Carmen Jones. Porgy and Bess was also directed by Otto Preminger, and as was the case with the earlier film, Dandridge’s singing voice was also dubbed. According to Marsha Seifert, producer Samuel Goldwyn reportedly insisted on using black singers for all the off-screen voices, but relented when music director Andre Previn claimed that no black singers could be found to match Dandridge’s onscreen incarnation of Bess. Instead, Previn used Bach specialist Adele Addison for the voice of Bess.

6 See the pressbook for Carmen Jones, Margaret Herrick Center for Film Research, Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.


8 Ibid., p. 131. In her autobiography, Horne recalls being told that an interracial marriage would destroy her career and describes the ways in which family members subtly pressured her not to marry Lewis. Given her personal history, it is not surprising that Horne would be sensitive to the issue of color barriers, both on Carmen Jones’s soundtrack and in the world of opera more generally.
Considering (and Reconsidering) a Tale of Love, Jealousy, and Violence

The Castillo Theatre, a 21-year-old experimental political theater in New York City of which I am a founder and resident dramaturg, was attracted to Carmen because of the beauty of its music and because of its glorification of romantic love.

Castillo’s engagement of Carmen involves five productions of three different Carmen-based scripts over a 10-year period, from 1987 to 1997. Each of these productions was an adaptation, or perhaps more accurately, a response to and a dialogue with Bizet’s Carmen. Taken together, they constitute a deconstruction/reconstruction not only of Carmen, but also of the theatrical conventions and ideological assumptions of 19th-century opera.

We went through this process because we believe that opera as a theatrical form is too beautiful and too magnificent in its possibilities to be left to the tiny strata of the population who currently patronize it. Carmen seemed a particularly good path into the genre because its obsession with romantic love and fate continues to hold sway over contemporary American audiences.

Fred Newman, Castillo’s artistic director and the writer of all and director of most of our Carmen productions, talks about it this way:

“Carmen is probably the opera that, over the last 150 years, has captured the responsiveness of the working class, of the common people, more than any other. ... What I saw, and this is no great insight, many others have as well, is that Carmen captures something of the experience of ordinary people. It’s high melodrama. Working people are madly in love with soap opera. Carmen is sort of a high-class soap opera with great music. We wanted to say something with it, say something about it, and have it say something to the ordinary people who watch only soap operas. Our interest in Carmen was nothing more complicated than that.”

This populist impulse in relation to Carmen, the most performed opera in the world, is not new. There have been a number of American adaptations of Carmen from Oscar Hammerstein II’s Carmen Jones in 1943 to the Ridiculous Theatre’s drag production of Carmen in 1995 to MTV’s Hip Hopera: Carmen in 2001. What distinguished Castillo’s first Carmen-based play, Carmen’s Community initially produced in 1987, from these other adaptations is that while they updated and “made relevant” the opera (the Hip Hopera, for example, used hip-hop music), they left in place its ethos and underlying social, political, and aesthetic assumptions. Carmen’s Community, instead, attempted to use the original as a point of departure, a springboard, if you will, for questioning and, eventually, challenging the opera’s assumptions about fate and romantic love.

How was this dialogue with and engagement of Carmen’s assumptions about love established? Initially by telling the same story twice.

In Carmen’s Community Newman jumps back and forth between scenes (including selected arias and duets) from Bizet’s Carmen and scenes from the life of Carmencita, a contemporary New Yorker who lives in a housing project behind Lincoln Center where the opera is being performed. Borrowing from Carmen Jones, Newman’s Escamil is a boxer. Don José becomes Officer Don, a New York City policeman. Carmencita’s women friends, Bizet’s Cigarette Girls, are Amsterdam Avenue prostitutes. Carmencita and her friends are great fans of the opera. As she finds her life spinning dangerously close to the plot of Carmen, Carmencita must decide whether to give in to her attraction to fate—thereby winding up another victim of male rage—or to challenge fate by trying to change the “inevitable.” Juxtaposition of the two parallel stories gives the audience a chance to see Carmen with two sets of eyes—to appreciate its power and beauty while at the same time being distanced from, or at least differently angled toward, its commitment to romantic love and tragic fate.

The dramatic tension in Carmen’s Community is not primarily to be found within either of the two interwoven stories, but in the conflict between the two. Just before Carmencita is about to face death at the hands of Officer Joe, her women friends from the street are able to intervene, and save her from getting killed. They then prevail on her to cross the border between the two stories, between “art” and “life,” between the 19th and 20th centuries. She goes “on stage” at the Met and helps the actress playing Carmen to her feet—in effect, bringing Carmen back to life and liberating her, along with the audience, from the iron grip of fate.

Carmen’s Community, then, is a struggle between the premodernist (romantic) notion of fate and the modernist (rationalist) concept of development. Development, while it has many, sometimes conflicting, meanings in contemporary discourse, unlike fate, assumes, in all its definitions, that things can change qualitatively, that something new can, and will, eventually, emerge from the old. Development implies transformation. Carmencita makes a decision not to leave herself vulnerable to the possessiveness of her two lovers; she takes action and changes fate. Both she and the narrative develop.

The next two productions of Carmen’s Community experimented with the relationship between the two narratives and their interface with the audience. In the first production the opera was
filtered primarily through the contemporary characters on stage, with the opera characters seen by the audience from “backstage,” that is, from the perspective of the contemporary characters and, hence, only seen from behind. The second production, which took place in October of 1989, worked to give the audience unmediated access to both sets of characters and their narratives.

It was staged in a large, unfinished storefront. The audience entered directly from the street and came upon a large banquet in process. Sitting around the lush long table were the opera singers in character. There was no special area for the audience; they took seats at the table or stood around. Soon Camencita and the rest of the characters from the contemporary story entered, also from the street, breaking up the banquet with their ruckus. Thereafter, the scenes from the two juxtaposed narratives were played as the actors moved around the large, cavernous space, with the audience following, clustering around the action wherever it happened to break out. The production was very popular, with many audience members commenting after performances about how exciting it was to be so close to the action, particularly to the opera singers and their beautiful and powerful voices.

While the production succeeded, we feel, more than the first in making the opera accessible to a non-opera audience, the very factors that contributed to this accessibility—the visceral excitement of moving around constantly and of being so close to the performers—also tended to obscure, to some extent, the tension between the two stories. The audience’s awareness of, or concern with, the engagement of fate and romantic love paled in the seemingly chaotic, very un-opera-like theatricality of the production.

A similar paradox emerged with the third production, which hit the boards in April 1992. Known at Castillo as the “Rap Carmen,” the Carmencita character and her friends here become a group of young African American hip-hoppers. The play’s contemporary characters were cast from the All Stars Talent Show Network, a performatory youth development program associated with Castillo.6

Like its immediate predecessor, the “Rap Carmen” was not done in a regular theatre space. This time it was performed in the lobby of the Castillo Theatre. The area was set up as a restaurant, with tables and chairs, near Lincoln Center, and the time was immediately after an opening-night performance of Carmen. Seated at one table in the restaurant was the cast of Carmen, celebrating their opening. Seated at another table were Carmencita and her friends. The interaction between the two narratives was minimal. The opera singers performed scenes, arias, and duets from the opera for the fun of it, as part of their post-opening celebration. The young people, on the other hand, were living the story in the midst of having dinner. Raps were added to the Carmencita scenes, which, to some extent, paralleled the songs in the original. Obviously, the script was altered for this production, although, it ended, as had the first two productions of Carmen’s Community, with Carmencita rebelling against fate and romantic love and avoiding death.

The cultural clash between the conventions and aesthetics of European opera and contemporary American culture, embodied here in black, working class hip-hop, was more acute in this production than in any other. However, what seems to have been made clearer by the aesthetic disharmony was the ideological harmony between the 19th and 20th centuries when it came to love and fate. While the musical and performance styles clashed, it seemed perfectly “natural” to both performers and audience that a tale of love, jealousy, and violence would take shape among today’s young people.

The fourth, and, to date, last production of Carmen’s Community took place in April 1995. For this production, Newman returned to the earlier, pre-rap, version of the script. The juxtaposition of the two versions of the story was facilitated considerably by Castillo’s new rotating stage, which had been built the year before. The parallelism of the two stories dominated. As Newman concluded in program notes for this production, “Carmen’s story remains the sad narrative of real life, even in our supposedly liberated culture.”7

While the rebellion against fate at the end remained, it was becoming increasingly clear to Newman and the rest of us at Castillo that the deconstruction of Carmen could not be complete as long as the narrative remained in place. The production might rebel against the ending of the story, but the story
remained the dominant, determining factor. As with most rebellions, Carmen’s Community was overdetermined by that against which it was rebelling. It remained trapped in the very romanticism it had set out to critique.

This trap was, we came to feel, the story itself and the characters who embodied it. The 20th-century characters created by Newman were not fundamentally different in their emotional construct than the 19th-century characters created by Bizet and his collaborators. Indeed, the play’s dramatic tension had been dependent on the parallels between the two stories enacted by parallel characters.

Castillo’s next engagement of Carmen, Carmen’s Place (A Fantasy) written by Newman, and produced under the direction of Gabrielle Kurlander at Castillo in 1997, is a very different play. To begin with, it has done away with the Carmen story, except as an elliptical reference. While the scenes, arias, and duets from the opera Carmen remain, they do so only as scenes being rehearsed by contemporary New York opera singers, and while there are love affairs in Carmen’s Place, there is no jealousy and no violence.

Key to realizing this next step in the deconstruction/reconstruction of Carmen was the transformation of the emotionality of the characters. The parallelism in names remains, but none of the characters—opera singers or others—are modeled on Bizet’s originals. The plot of Carmen’s Place is minimal. Karen Allen, a mezzo-soprano from Montana, Don Noble, a tenor from Queens, New York, and Placido Quesara, a baritone from Barcelona, are in rehearsal for a production of Bizet’s Carmen at the New York City Opera. Karen has the role of Carmen; Don that of Don José; and Placido is performing Escamillio. After meeting on the first day of rehearsal, they go off to have lunch together at the Opera Diner (the “Carmen’s Place” of the title) just a few blocks from Lincoln Center, where they meet the waitress Carmen Ortiz and her boyfriend, Officer José Lugo. The opera singers invite Carmen and José to sit in on rehearsals, at which the Bizet text is performed. In the course of the play, all five of the characters become friends, Karen Allen and Don Noble fall in love, and Placido and Carmen have an affair. At the end of the play, just as Carmen is about to open, Placido learns that he has gotten a role at the Metropolitan Opera, and it’s revealed that he has a wife and children in Barcelona he can now afford to bring to the United States. Carmen and Placido stop their affair, Karen and Don stay together, and they all remain friends.

Obviously, such a pacific plot would have been impossible with characters constructed along the line of Bizet’s originals. Just as this Carmen is steady in her emotional state and supportive of those she cares for, José is non-possessive and unconditional in his love for Carmen. He says of the liaison between Carmen and Placido, “So, yeah, I could be as jealous as the next guy. And Carmen is my whole life. But Carmen says that we mean forever. And I trust her. Always have. Always will....” We’ve known each other since we were 10, and we loved each other from the moment we met. And it’s never been me tellin’ her what to do, or her tellin’ me what to do. I’m just a simple Puerto Rican working-class guy but I got that straight.” Officer José Lugo may be “simple” but he’s no typical Puerto Rican working-class guy, nor is he a typical New York City cop, nor is he a typical contemporary man of any sort. He is what men could be if they were able to give up possessiveness in love. Perhaps this is why the play’s subtitle is “A Fantasy.”

It also brings us back to the concept of development. Carmen and José have developed in relation to their earlier incarnations. It is not that they’ve been “updated,” they’ve been transformed into something and someone else. Yet who they are is very much connected to who they were. Newman’s approach to development is dialectical in the sense that it assumes that characters (and human beings) are both who they are and who they are not at the same time. Thus José Lugo is, of course, Don José. But he is, at the same time, of course, not Don José. This dynamic is what gives dramatic power to the character José Lugo and meaning to his non-possessive love.

Thus, Carmen’s Place is not, like Carmen’s Community, a critique of Carmen or its notions of romantic love and fate. It is not a critique at all. Rather, it is an exploration of different ways of loving. Not just Carmen and José, but all of the characters love in various new ways. In fact, each of them loves each of the others. They love each other differently, but none of these loves is deemed true or false, weaker or stronger, more or less passionate—and none of these loves is characterized by possessiveness. In effect, Newman seems to be saying, “There...
are more loves, Bizet, than are dreamed of in your opera.” Having punctured the predetermined plot of the original, a plethora of possibilities appears.

*Carmen’s Place* has become, in effect, a reconstruction of *Carmen* and, in that sense, the completion, of our engagement of Bizet’s masterpiece. As a theatre with a nontraditional, primarily working class, audience, Castillo was interested in bringing them the rich musical tradition of European opera. As a political theatre concerned with exploring and challenging cultural assumptions, we were interested in the hold that fate and romantic love continue to assert on contemporary society. In the end, we wound up keeping the music while radically transforming the opera’s story and characters.

Those 10 years of experimentation taught us that the opera’s plot (along with the characters generated by it) embodied fate and romantic love, and that they could not be effectively challenged within that narrative framework. The logic of our deconstruction led us to a radical reconstruction. A story of love, jealousy, and violence became something very different. Was it still *Carmen* in any sense? Perhaps not. Does it remain in the opera tradition? That, of course, depends on how narrowly one views that tradition. We at Castillo like to think that this 10-year process was a contribution to the opera tradition and hope that our reconstruction will be one among many rediscoverings/redefinings of opera in the 21st century.

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Remaking Carmen for the International Market

The story of Carmen continues to excite the popular imagination and to incite a remarkable proliferation of ever more creative media forms: cinematic, choreographic, or musical, ever since its original inception in Prosper Mérimée’s novella of 1845. Like Faust and Don Juan before it, Carmen’s iterability or tendency to proliferate often accords to it the status of a modern myth, a kind of reverse Don Juan tradition in Western culture, whose main character generates oppositional responses to the ideological order of its day.

This proliferating capacity of Carmen and its potentially mythic proportions relate, I believe, to its representation of a fundamental crisis in the cultures of modern nationalisms as they struggle to define or redefine themselves in resistance to the pressures of internationalization. Already in the original Carmen the narrator addresses both a very local political scene and “toute l’Europe savante,” “all of educated Europe.” To underline the importance of the double address, the novella features two narrators, two ways of telling the tale, and two morals to the story resulting in an unresolved moral ambiguity. To this day, the story of Carmen continues to leave us uncertain about who is guilty and who innocent. In the context of this original Carmen, although musicologists consider Bizet’s music to be the generator of Carmen’s ongoing reiterations, I want to argue that it is Bizet’s re-staging of Mérimée’s original story that accounts more precisely for Carmen’s mythic renewability. It is the fitting of one version into another and our reading back and forth between versions that still matters.

Two vastly different contemporary iterations of Carmen as both the purveyor of and antidote to national identity myths illustrate the power of the tale’s ongoing ambiguity. Both enlance the Carmen story within the framework of an internationally appealing musical sound ambiance. Jean Luc Godard’s Prénom: Carmen or First-name: Carmen, produced in 1983 along with a plethora of other European Carmens; and John Townsend’s Carmen: Hip-Hopera, a 2002 remake of Carmen Jones, diverge on many levels. I bring them together provocatively, however, in order to draw our attention to the ways that both versions pit national myth against international appeal by deploying a variety of similar formal pressures. These pressures distinguish story-telling from music and force us to reflect on the means of expression of the forms themselves, of film or video respectively. Remember, if you are playing on an international field, words cannot be meant to matter too much. But you can draw attention to the unspoken power of the media themselves.

This self-reflective and ambiguous nature of Carmen was there from the start. Mérimée wrote both an impassioned fiction and a detached ethnographic study. While Bizet watered down the brazen sexuality and violence of the original tale (tailoring his retelling to bourgeois tastes), he also reiterated the formal tension of the narrative by deploying the opéra-comique form to full dramatic effect. Following the generic constraints of this form, Carmen included both symphonic sound and spoken voice in a sometimes jarring juxtaposition. The point was to help listeners to hear long passages quoted from Mérimée’s original text, and to ask them to reflect on how the pleasure of listening to symphony and song may be like or unlike the pleasures and pains of the characters on stage. We know that most of the members of the original audiences for Bizet’s production knew Mérimée’s tale quite well. This means that from the start, Bizet’s opera heralded a very self-conscious approach to the effects of opera music listening. This self-consciousness can be attributed, I think, to Bizet’s wariness before the cultural politics of his day, and specifically, his wariness before Wagner’s use of continuous melody to forge and to anesthetize an international community for mass or popular art. Bizet’s opera was produced at the height of Wagner mania and the choice of operatic leitmotifs, among other formal effects, was clearly resonant politically speaking before the eyes and ears of the savvy Parisian elite who attended the first performances of Carmen.

Today Wagnerian sound: its continuous melody, its thwarted cadences, its helpful leitmotiv that guide narrative cueing in what Claudia Gorbman refers to as “unheard melody” graces the background scoring of nearly all internationally-distributed Hollywood movies. As a result, contemporary reiterations of Carmen have largely sought to restore the clashing shocks of Bizet’s juxtaposition of music and dialogue and to shake up the hypnotic unresponsiveness Wagnerian sound continues to promote among the international audiences of Hollywood film or prime-time TV. Both Godard’s Carmen film and Townsend’s MTV Hip-Hopera re-enliven formal pressures that pit music against words and bring them back closer, ironically, to the formal shape of Mérimée’s original. In the case of Godard, the film appears to buck the pro-European Union trend abuzz in 1983; in the case of Townsend it remains to be seen whether a black subculture critiques or shores up the mainstream values of American pop culture.
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Prénom: Carmen by Jean-Luc Godard, the enfant terrible of French new wave cinema, was produced in the context of what I call the project in cultural homogenization promised by the European Union in 1983. In 1983 Spain was negotiating its entry into the Union, despite its poverty, and emotions ran high on the subject of Spanish national identity and militant regionalisms in the context of European federalism. Rather than smooth over the divides that threatened the European political and cultural scene in 1983, the Godard film forces our reconsideration of the project of Union itself as an antidote to European wars. It features a stylized retelling of the Carmen story as a fiction about a modern-day bank robbery under the cover of a film being made of a bank-robbery. With respect to the film narrative, the insertion of one fiction into a second mimics the structure of the original Mérimée tale. Musically, while it avoids any direct citation of Bizet’s music, save a brief and passing whistling of Carmen’s “Habanera,” this film, like all of Godard’s films, seeks to undermine the comfortable continuity of film montage and mixage—image track and sound track—through abruptly spliced editing to make us aware of the film work. This editing foregrounds images of a string quartet playing the international sounds of Beethoven—a gesture to a nostalgic, greater-European continuity (even if this was before the “Ode to Joy” became the anthem of the European Union)—and more startlingly still, images of ocean waves. The wave shots give us think time, but they allow for completely illogical effects of narrative splicing and undo the linear unfolding of the story as we all get lost in the Beethoven.

The story line, told through dramatic dialogue in French, clashes with the nonsensical waves of symphonic internationalism. But if the national-international tension is not wholly apparent in the oceanic splices as they contrast with the dialogue, Godard drives the point home in a set of hospital scenes that frame the film. In the first of these, we are told that it is important not to listen to, but to watch sound. In this scene a confusing array of materials of film expression bombard us just at the moment of the posing of an ethical dilemma about war and peace. First, there is the conflict between dramatic dialogue spoken by the characters and the Beethoven quartets to which we as spectators alone are privy. Then, on the patient’s tape-recording camera, we hear “Au Clair de la lune,” a poem by Verlaine captured in song and transformed into a popular national ditty. Verlaine’s poetry, his heroism, his struggle to write music with words are all but forgotten here. They have been transformed into a palatable sound bite that gives us little more to think about than a provincial French countryside in the moonlight and the long tradition of “la chanson française.” This music fades and strengthens as it competes with other sounds, sounds of a European war presumably, of an air raid, sounds of kitchen preparations, all emanating from the aural camera. As we “watch the sound,” we are left asking ourselves which sound is more European and which interrupts our consideration of ethical issues more: the dulling domestication of war or the commoditized sounds of poetry turned into pop culture. Both are good strategies for making Europe.

Leaping forward from First Name: Carmen to John Townsend’s Hip-Hopera produced in 2002 we can notice that the generic constraints of MTV video are reiterating a tension between sound and word, national values and international marketing that we can trace all the way back to Bizet’s remake of the original tale. The Hip-Hopera clearly gestures to a long history of American culture—that of Franco-American relations and that of black and white America. Even the casual observer can hear in the rap music style an ambivalent expression of both national yearning and subversion of that yearning, of story-telling and the undermining of the telling, of a desire to make poetry and to undercut an esthetics of poetry that would merely charm or lull us into consumerist illusions of bourgeois pleasure. Clearly the bohemian/bourgeois tension of the original Carmen according to which one necessarily defines the limits of the other and in which the actual “working out” of a national bourgeois social identity is at stake, is taken up here as a black/white tension. The rap lyrics are not really about murdering prostitutes or “dissing” authority figures, moreover. As in Bizet’s remake, any unsavory features of otherwise pleasing figures are murdered or removed. Now it is about blending the extremes of black culture into a fairly tasteless, oversexed and dreamy America of complete assimilation to bourgeois norms. This America lacks ethnicity and scoffs at class—it’s a melting pot just like the heroine, Beyoncé Knowles,
whose straight hair and artificially sculpted body are almost devoid of color or cultural markers.

Once the story has been resolved and Carmen is dead, the very end of the opera features an MTV flashback that takes place in the mind of the José figure, Sergeant Derek Hill. As in the original Carmen, this closing flashback in which José sees his life and his mistakes “flash” before his eyes and ours, is itself contained within the narrative framework of the video wrought in rap music. This flashback parallels the structure of the original story of Carmen in Mérimée’s novella, in which José tells the Carmen story to the narrator as a flashback from his prison cell resulting in two different versions of the tale. Interestingly, the two versions of Derek Hill’s life, the video-maker’s and Derek’s mental one, also contain different images and these are topped off at the very end by a third version, a news story whose reporter, Connie Chung, has got it all wrong. A commentary on American TV and sensational reportage? Perhaps. A way of watching sound just like Godard’s new wave Carmen? Without question.

Ultimately, we are left asking if the musical style of Carmen: Hip-Hopera actually shores up or challenges a storyline so deeply reflective of our national identity myths? Is it subversive or just one more version of how to harness the energies of black American culture? Clearly a direct link is exposed between marketing rap music and living the American dream. On Carmen’s bureau, there’s a little framed cliché that says “Keep your eyes on the stars and you’ll be one;” and another, “Live each day like it’s your last.” Here women sell their bodies for new outfits and cops become corrupt not because they challenge the status quo, but because they are products of the status quo. Moreover, rap music is portrayed in the video as a multi-million-dollar performance art industry, very clean and neat, completely divorced from its original subversive roots. Yet, the structured cracks and fissures in a story we know well celebrated in a mix of hip hop, rap, symphony, song, and dialogue do repeat the formal, and I would argue political, tensions hidden in the novella form of the original Carmen that Bizet emphasized so eloquently within his own watered down iteration.

Can this formal shaping actually wake us up to the illusions of American dreaming in our culture? And given that we now live in a culture in which subversion (at least modified subversion) sells, is the Godard film subversive as were the inexpensive new wave films of the late 50s and 60s, or does the film simply shore up a national self-image of the French as esoteric anti-American intellectuals? Whatever our answers, we can be sure that Carmen will continue to shake them up for Carmen herself was made to push us just beyond the comfort zone.

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Three Arts & Sciences faculty will launch the Center for the Humanities’ new Faculty Fellowship Program in spring 2006. They are Erin McGlothlin, Ph.D., assistant professor of Germanic language & literatures; Peter Kastor, Ph.D., assistant professor of history; and Harriet Stone, Ph.D., professor of Romance languages. Also selected was Gerald Izenberg, Ph.D., professor of history, who will be in residence in spring 2007.

The fellowships, open to all tenured and tenure-track faculty in Arts & Sciences, are designed to provide both a physical and intellectual environment for innovative, interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching. Recipients will spend a semester in residence with the Center, researching new projects while also attending a variety of presentations and events and delivering a formal, public lecture about their work.

McGlothlin’s project, titled “Restoring the Story: Fiction and History in Contemporary Jewish Holocaust Literature,” will investigate how contemporary Jewish writers have dealt with the memory of the Holocaust through a diverse body of literature, both fiction and nonfiction.

Kastor’s “An Accurate Empire: Rendering America, 1776-1830” will examine how Americans described, depicted, governed and—in the end—understood the continent of North America during the late-18th and early 19th centuries.

Stone’s “Objects for the Table: The Art of Science in Early Modern Europe” will employ Dutch genre painting to illustrate how the artistic ordering of pictorial space relates to the scientific practice of assembling specimens and organizing data.

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